

Man vs Wild? An Ecocritical Reading of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes an analysis of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, using an ecocritical lens, to explore its representation of nature and the Aboriginal experience in the context of white colonial oppression, with an emphasis on the role of the filmic medium. The article argues that the film represents nature as playing an active role with reference to the act of resistance depicted in the film. In this respect, the paper examines the relationships among the white coloniser, the Aboriginal people, and nature, as well as the opposing worldviews of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism underlying these relationships, as they are dealt with in the text. The narrative and formal strategies employed in connection with these issues is central to the analysis.

Keywords: Aboriginal; Anthropocentrism; Cinematic; Ecocentrism; Ecocriticism, Nature; Resistance.

Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002), directed by Philip Noyce, is a landmark Australian film noted for its representation of Aboriginal experience, particularly of the 'Stolen Generations' i.e. the large number of Aboriginal children, mainly those of mixed-descent, who were taken from their families and housed in government establishments from the late-19th to the mid-20th centuries. The children were 'removed' on the pretext of ensuring their welfare; however, their removal was intended to bring about their assimilation into 'white society' and the erasure of Aboriginal language and culture. The extent of this issue as well as the experiences of those affected came to light with the publication of the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report (Korff).

The film is based on Doris Pilkington's book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, a personal account of her family's experiences, detailing her mother Molly Craig's escape with her sister Daisy and cousin Gracie from the Moore River Native Settlement. The film dramatizes the children's abduction from their family and their removal to Moore River, followed by their

escape and 1500-mile journey back to their 'country'. The representation of their journey across the Australian 'outback' is set against the State's unsuccessful efforts to recapture them, spearheaded by A. O. Neville, the 'Chief Protector of Aborigines'.

This paper undertakes a reading of the film using the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism involves, at the fundamental level, the interrogation of cultural texts in terms of their representations of nature, and the worldview thereby reflected regarding the relationship between human beings and nature (Willocoquet-Maricondi 2-3). Situated within this broader framework, cinematic ecocriticism involves the study of film texts in terms of their representations of nature and the politics thereof, at the level of both content and form (*ibid* 7-8). The role of 'place' in a text, the conflicting worldviews of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, and the conflicts that arise between indigenous populations and colonisers in connection with the environment, are other issues raised within the ambit of ecocriticism which are of relevance to this research.

Rabbit-Proof Fence has been explored as a postcolonial text, analysing its representation of the indigenous subjective experience of colonial domination; and as a 'historical film', in terms of its functioning as history and its influence on the present. Cain's argument centres on the idea of the 'mythologization of distance', where by emphasising and exaggerating the distance covered by the children, i.e. 'mythologizing' it, the film alienates the Aboriginal people from white audiences, thereby becoming "yet another way of consuming an-other, as spectacle" (303). Lydon similarly argues that, while the film "mark(s) an important stage in public acknowledgement of the Indigenous experience" (147), by employing affective properties of cinematic realism and allowing viewers to experience colonialism as a nightmare, it ultimately produces complacency. Collins and Davis, on the other hand, posit the counter argument that by employing strategies producing 'shock and recognition', the film is able to produce a change in the audience's view of the past. Furthermore, the film produces a powerful image of Aboriginal resistance and survival, overturning the image of Aboriginal people as 'lost children'. This argument centred on the representation of resistance in the film is carried forward and extended in this paper.

This paper argues that the film represents 'nature' as an active participant in the act of resistance represented in the text, first, as an agent of Aboriginal resistance against the white oppressor, and second, thereby engaging in a symbolic resistance of its own against the same source of oppression. The analysis is based on an examination of the text in terms of colonial ra-

cial oppression and anthropocentrism as parallel forms of oppression, and in terms of ecocentrism as indigenous worldview and filmic approach.

The film begins with a prologue scene, consisting of an establishing shot panning over a desert landscape, as the elderly 'real Molly' narrates the introduction in voiceover – describing how “the white people came to our country”, and that “they were building a long fence”; with Molly’s people established as being the traditional occupants of the land, with the white man’s activities portrayed as alien and invasive. The shot transitions to one in which the fence appears extending into the distance, a visible interruption to the flow of the land, as ominous music builds to a crescendo. Thus, from the outset, the film highlights the relationship between the Aboriginal people and their traditional land in the visual linking of Molly’s voice with images of the land; as well as the intrusiveness of European colonialist activity, in relation to the Aboriginal people and the natural environment. The prologue sets the tone for the representation of this oppressive activity in the film, taken forward as follows.

With the advent of European colonisation of Australia, Aboriginal populations were decimated by disease and conflict over the latter’s traditionally-held land. Underlying this and subsequent colonising activities is the ideology of racial superiority of white Eurocentric discourse, by which indigenous or non-white peoples were seen as naturally inferior, thereby creating grounds for justifying their oppression. Aboriginal people were represented as animal-like, lacking culture and religion, and their extinction was seen as inevitable and desirable (*Australians Together*). This approach is evident in the film’s representation of white men’s activities in relation to the three ‘half-caste children’. Early in the film, two white men on horseback are depicted observing Molly, Daisy and Gracie and discussing their status as ‘half-castes’; the framing of their position on horseback some distance away from the Aboriginal settlement, and subjecting the children to their probing and critical gaze, establishes them as oppressors – the source of Aboriginal oppression and dehumanization. They are soon revealed to be “policemen looking for half-castes”. The scene then shifts to a government office in Perth where A. O. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aboriginals is introduced. He examines documents containing the details of the three girls, and ‘authorises their removal’ from the care of their mothers and their transportation to Moore River Native Settlement. Once again, the children appear subjected to dehumanization, reduced to names on a paper and objects to be controlled by the State.

Contextualising these events, the film later incorporates a scene in which Neville is giving a presentation about the so-called ‘half-caste problem’.

He argues, "Are we to allow the creation of an unwanted third race... or should they be advanced to white status?"; and later explains how through intermarriage among white and Aboriginal people, "the Aboriginal has simply been bred out", utilising pictures of three generations of people of Aboriginal descent—once again dehumanized, reduced to mere specimens. Via this narrative strategy, the film demonstrates how objectification and dehumanization of Aboriginal people seen in the above scenes are functions of the white state's ideology of facilitating assimilation and ultimate extinction of Aboriginal populations. Furthermore, Neville's concluding comment, "In spite of himself, the native must be helped", reflects the ideology of the 'white man's burden' i.e. "the responsibility of governing races supposedly inferior to his own" (Porteus 8) employed as justification for all these forms of colonialist oppression.

Significantly, this rhetoric in reference to indigenous peoples finds parallels in the coloniser's approach to the land – which similarly appears to inform the filmic representation. A scene is incorporated in which the girls discuss the circumstances of the rabbit-proof fence's construction with a white worker. Rabbits were an invasive species introduced into Australia by the European settlers themselves, which ironically became a hindrance to their settlements, resulting in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to contain them via the construction of the rabbit-proof fence breadthwise across the continent (Zhou); a manoeuvre that exemplifies the anthropocentric worldview and ideology of control characterising the white colonial approach to nature. As per this ideology – characteristic of the Western Eurocentric worldview and centred on a hierarchical structure where nature is subordinated to man –Australia was dubbed *terra nullius* i.e. empty land, an untamed, dangerous territory occupied by an equally dangerous people, with the history of Australia narrativized in terms of conquering this land (Rodwell 194). As "colonial processes of appropriation were largely based on myths of human and cultural emptiness" (*ibid* 198), acknowledging an abundant land with Aboriginal people as its beneficiaries would contradict those myths. Furthermore, the focus on a narrative of conquest effectively shifted attention away from colonial oppression; "the national narrative became one of a hard and heroic fight against nature itself rather than one of ruthless spoliation and dispossession" (Reynolds cited in *Australians Together*).

The whiteworker describes the fence as "the longest fence in the world", and how it "keeps the rabbits on that side of the fence...the farmland on this side", while shots of the wire fence cutting across the landscape in a seemingly arbitrary manner, with identical vegetation present on either side, appear. His words and tone reflect a conviction of the need for and

possibilities of human control over nature, a natural outcome of an anthropocentric hierarchy. Yet, the scene also hints at the divergence of such activity and its ideological underpinnings from the indigenous perspective toward nature, in the apparent arbitrariness of the fence's position and Molly's look of consternation at this explanation, as is further discussed below.

From the above analysis, a close parallel in the form and source of oppression of the indigenous and of nature by the white Eurocentric colonialist regime is recognizable, with the film correspondingly effecting a parallel exposition of the same – the scenes occur in quick succession of each other at the beginning of the film; and suggest both, the underlying unease of colonialists in reference to the oppressed i.e. with the indigenous seen as less-than-human and nature seen as hostile, and their belief in the responsibility of the superior being i.e. the white man, to bring the inferior i.e. the Aboriginal people and nature, under control.

In opposition to the anthropocentrism of the white coloniser, is the ecocentrism of indigenous peoples (Willoquet-Maricondi 15), a worldview that sees ecology as a “cosmology of interrelatedness” (Machiorlatti 66), where the material realm and its human and nonhuman inhabitants, including plants, animals and minerals, as well as the non-material realm, including the planetary bodies and the ancestors, are seen as interconnected and interdependent (*ibid*). In the context of analysing the film, the idea of the ‘ecocentric’ work is relevant i.e. one which, among other things, depicts the nonhuman world not merely as a backdrop for human action, as an anthropocentric text would, but situates human history within natural history (Willoquet-Maricondi 3); or in other words, emphasising the interconnectedness between human activity and nature, where each necessarily impacts the other. The ideology of ecocentrism, both as it manifests in the indigenous worldview and in the filmic worldview, appears reflected in the text, where not only is the difference between the indigenous and colonial approach to nature indicated, but where nature is given a central and active role.

In the opening scene following the prologue, close-up shots of Molly smiling are interspersed with shots of the forested area in which she lives, framed from her optical perspective. She appears comfortable in familiar surroundings, as evident in her soft gaze; which is soon drawn upwards by the sound of a bird in the sky, described to her as the “Spirit Bird” by her mother who now appears by her, which “will always look after (her)”. In this representation of the environment and the appearance of the Spirit Bird, a figure that mirrors those found in Aboriginal oral traditions,

this scene symbolically establishes a close connection between Molly and by extension, her community, and their environment. Furthermore, Molly and the two other children are later seen learning traditional hunting techniques from their family. The film suggests that land is central to the Aboriginal way of life, a source of their identity, and occupies a central place in their oral tradition; as well something on which they depend for sustenance and have learned to navigate for survival, though in a relationship of cooperation as opposed to exploitation (Berndt and Tonkinson). Therefrom emerges a narrative construction of the ecocentric worldview that governs the Aboriginal way of life.

Later, upon Molly, Daisy and Gracie's removal to Moore River, they experience not only the trauma of separation from their family and community, but also from their own 'country'; as a series of scenes dramatize their being transported across the country, shots lay emphasis on the visibly changing landscape and the girls' quiet and resigned gaze directed there-to - a marked change from the sense of peace and 'home' indicated in Molly's gazing at the environment in the aforementioned scene.

During their time at Moore River, the girls concretely experience the racist ideology of white society, as it seeks to erase their culture and language, and assimilate them into white society; each instance of oppression that Molly encounters impacts her, with interspersed shots of her expression indicating her growing hostility.

Considering the above sets of scenes together, Molly's ultimate decision to escape is rendered complex - simultaneously becoming the act of a child missing her mother; of the racially oppressed seeking to resist white society; and of the Aboriginal person wanting to return to familiar and traditional territory wherein lies the source of her identity.

In a scene just prior to their escape, Molly's attention is drawn to the environment by the distant sound of thunder; with the film again utilising interspersed close-up shots of Molly's face and shots of the environment to reiterate the understanding that Molly is intrinsically attuned to nature. In the distance, dark clouds are seen, and Molly quickly responds accordingly. She decides to escape, confidently assuring the other two girls that "the rain will cover our tracks"; whereby the film first suggests Molly's ability to understand and utilise nature, situated within a broader tradition that values the interrelatedness of human and nature. This representation is later taken forward, where throughout the journey, Molly cleverly navigates the landscape despite its alienness, relying on her traditional knowledge.

However, what also becomes significant in the above scene is the active role that nature now appears to acquire. According to Collins and Davis, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* marks a departure from representations governed by the colonial worldview – marked by the depiction of the Australian landscape as a ‘blank canvas’, and the parallel characterisation of its indigenous inhabitants as ‘noble savage’ and ‘lost child’, implying the inferiority, emptiness and submission of both nature and the Aboriginal people. They argue that the film “avoids (this) kind of primitivism... counters its image of Aboriginal people... by providing a powerful image of Aboriginal survival and resistance” (46); this argument, as corroborated in the above analysis of Molly’s acts of resistance and agency, may also be extended to the film’s depiction of nature – no longer is it a ‘blank canvas’, but is represented as an active participant in resistance, in line with eco-centrism as filmic worldview.

Molly’s confidence in the rain and its eventual arrival thus take on new significance. She appears to trust that rain will come, though it is early enough for it to not be assured, as evident from the significant amount of time depicted as passing before its arrival. Molly and the others run away in the morning; a while later, the warden realises their absence, and the tracker is set on their trail. The role of nature becomes central from the moment in which Molly, while running through the forest, hears thunder. Soon after, a shot is focused on the forest floor being hit by a torrential downpour, transitioning to a shot of the tracker searching for traces of the girls’ path – his vision and the speed of his movement clearly hindered by the rain. In contrast, the rain seems to evoke a sense of freedom and safety for Molly; as they stop by a tree, she hugs her sisters and smiles up at the sky, her early confidence contradicted by this reaction, her joy seemingly in gratitude for a hope fulfilled. In this carefully developed visual construction, nature itself appears to actively cooperate with Molly, facilitating the escape.

Toward film’s end, upon Molly and Daisy’s arrival at desert country, the landscape transforms into a particularly harsh and hostile environment; a cinematographic bleaching effect is employed, with the images appearing discoloured and hazy. Both girls eventually collapse, seemingly defeated by nature. However, in a while, as they lie unconscious, the familiar sound of the ‘Spirit Bird’ is heard; framed via an extreme close-up of her eyes, upon hearing this sound, Molly wakes up and sees the bird in the sky. She stands up, continuing to stare up at the sky, following which shot after shot of the surrounding landscape framed via her optical perspective, appear. This scene constitutes a prolonged, emotionally charged moment, with the environment visually and thematically at its centre; at the end of

which, she smiles and softly says "Home". The Spirit Bird's arrival at a fortuitous moment, particularly in light of Molly's mother's words at the beginning of the film; followed by this deliberately constructed representation of the environment in association with the idea of 'home'; together form another significant instance of the filmic representation of nature – both as actively facilitating the girls' escape, and as integral to Aboriginal identity.

Another significant thematic that arises in relation to the filmic representation of nature involves the visualisation of the sustained ideological conflict between Aboriginal and colonial worldviews.

Throughout the film, the vastness of the landscape is emphasised visually via the use of wide and extreme wide shots, with the children contrastingly diminished in size. Yet, while indicative of the children's vulnerability during the long journey in unfamiliar territory, this representation also demonstrates how it works in their favour, making it more difficult for the State to track and recapture them. Like the girls, Neville must navigate the landscape in order to find them. But while they rely on nature directly, he relies on maps, which function within the white colonisers' broader colonising and controlling worldview.

During their journey, close-up shots of Molly's face as she observes the environment and makes judgements are utilised, reflecting the Aboriginal approach to the environment. Similar shots for Neville represent his parallel attempts to make judgements aiding in their recapture, albeit here involving hypothesizing based on a map. The representation of these contrasting approaches demonstrates the difference in the broader ideological approaches to nature of the Aboriginal people and the white coloniser – the latter's view of nature as an obstacle to be controlled, contrasted against the former's ecocentric worldview of interrelatedness and cooperation. Furthermore, despite their vulnerability and the unfamiliarity of the landscape during the journey, Molly appears confident, again reflecting the indigenous worldview. In contrast, while deliberating over how to find the children, the police inspector with whom Neville attempts to plan the recapture, indicates his unwillingness to "risk his men" in the "rough terrain"; while Neville admits to a similar concern, emphasising the need to find them before they enter "the real desert country" – with both reflecting the white colonial fear of the 'untamed, dangerous' environment.

Yet despite the seeming advantages of maps and manpower, the State appears powerless to outmanoeuvre Molly in navigating the terrain. The white State's ultimate failure and humiliation may thus be interpreted as an outcome of the conflict between Aboriginal and colonial ideologies

represented in the film, wherein the former is allowed to triumph. This triumph is demonstrated best in the final scenes; wherein, once again nature appears to play an active role, not only in facilitating Aboriginal resistance, but also this ideological triumph.

In a scene prior to the children's return, the police officer deployed to Jigalong to catch them, senses something amiss and apprehensively enters the forest. As he moves, he is framed as being enveloped and hindered by the forest itself. He trips over tree-branches, and appears unnerved by the sounds of unknown animals; the bluish tint of the imagery further lends a sinister aspect to the environment; with the visual construction of the environment seeming to mirror the white colonisers' fear thereof. He soon encounters Molly's mother and grandmother, and though armed with a gun, appears intimidated. The women stare at him threateningly as the animal cries are amplified, rendering the scene even more sinister. Significantly, here the Aboriginal people and the natural environment, as recipients of parallel forms of oppression by the same perpetrator i.e. the white man, appear to converge in their resistance against the latter. As though in response, the policeman runs away in fear.

In contrast to the visual presentation of this scene, is the one that follows. As the Spirit Bird utters its call, an overhead shot of the forest cuts to a shot of the Spirit Bird, and then to a shot of Molly; she appears to listen intently and imitates its call, signalling her presence to her family. Her mother responds, enabling the children to find their way. As the family reunites against the late evening sky, the bluish tint of the imagery that appeared sinister in the previous scene, now offsets the joy in this one. By using similar imagery, yet invested with divergent connotations, the film appears to utilise a markedly differential representation of nature based on the perspective adopted – the Aboriginal view of nature marked by a sense of interrelation and cooperation, is in contrast to the white oppressor's view of nature as threatening, with the visual construction constructed accordingly.

In the following scene, the children are seen being welcomed back into the community, with the forest seemingly enveloping this intimate scene, via the foregrounding of the tree branches; this is contrasted against Neville's defeat in the next scene, wherein he finally gives up the search and sits resigned in his office, framed via an overhead shot amplifying the sense of his defeat. Finally, in the epilogue, the narrative is brought full circle in the reappearance of the 'real Molly's' voice-over, as she describes how "we went straightaway and hid in the forest" i.e. once again, relying on the environment for safety. Thus, in the construction of the film's end,

marked by the ultimate triumph of Aboriginal resistance against the white oppressor, nature's central role can again be recognised.

Based on the above analyses of the film's representations of nature, involving the interpretation of narrative strategies, and of elements of formal construction involving the use of framing, sound, colour and so on, it can be concluded that nature is given an active role in the film; not merely to create the setting of the children's escape i.e. an act of Aboriginal resistance, but represented as facilitating this resistance and playing a vital role in bringing about their triumph, by seemingly cooperating with the children and thwarting the white oppressor. The paper takes this argument further, in that via such a representation, nature itself is imaginatively allowed to resist against the same source of oppression – where parallel to the white Eurocentric oppression of the Aboriginal subjects, nature is subjected to European anthropocentric control; and in helping to thwart the former, as aforementioned, nature is also allowed to symbolically thwart the latter.

The paper has also sought to examine the ideological underpinnings of the filmic representation, in relation to nature. The title is intended to emphasise the film's challenge to the anthropocentric worldview, represented in the phrase 'Man vs Wild?' – where 'man' refers to the white coloniser, and wild to everything that he considers to be less than himself i.e. both the Aboriginal people and nature. The film's representation of nature, as active and central to bringing about the children's resistance and ultimate triumph, seems to exemplify ecocentrism; particularly in terms of the Aboriginal belief in the interrelatedness of all things, where the Aboriginal subjects of the film and nature are closely allied, and the Aboriginal tradition of cooperation, where nature in the film appears to reciprocate this cooperation. In this representation, the film thus appears to effect the ideological triumph of Aboriginal ecocentrism over an approach of anthropocentrism.

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