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"WALKING INTO THE WORLD OF THE WESTERN": DAVID MICHÔD'S *THE ROVER* AS AUSTRALIAN POST-WESTERN

At the end of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (as the two anti-heroes attempt to escape an ambush in Bolivia), Butch says to Sundance "I got an idea where we should go next," to which Sundance replies "I don't want to hear it… It was your great ideas that got us here." But Butch tells him anyway: "Australia." For Sundance, "Australia's no better than here," but for Butch it offers some important differences: "They speak English in Australia… so we wouldn't be foreigners. And they ride horses. And they got lots of miles to hide out in…" This exchange precedes their deaths in a hail of bullets frozen in the moment before impact, like two myths formed before our eyes. What interests me about this exchange is the way Australia is offered up as a place where these two American outlaws might not be foreigners, finding a landscape and culture into which their Western exploits might seamlessly belong. Indeed there has been a long history of parallels between the American West and the Australian outback; of bushrangers and outlaws, violent assertions of masculinity, the dominance of whiteness over indigenous populations, the taming of land, and the cumulative construction of "a settler colonial mode of cinema" (Limbrick, 69) reinforcing and repeating these tropes. This article will explore the consequences of this construction in an era when the cinematic Western has undergone death and resurrection, revision, critical suspicion, and surprising reinvention. To

pick up on Butch Cassidy's point, how "foreign" is the Western genre in the context of contemporary Australian cinema? How much does the American Western "travel" into Australian cinema and what might it become within this new and different space? What dialogic uses might Australian cinema find for these multiple relations, connections, and parallels? (see Hamilton).

If, as Peter Limbrick argued, "Westerns are about the negotiation of the tensions and contradictions of building 'home' in a disputed space, the demarcation of territory between European settlers and indigenous inhabitants; and the construction of normative racial and gendered identities based on supremacy of a white and heterosexual family unit" (70), then Australian history might indeed have many uses for the genre. The classic American Western was defined through "engaged heroes who morally ensure the rule of right," as Stanley Corkin put it, and could be found in iconic films such as *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Red River* (1948) which spoke loudly of triumphal conquests of land and people, the establishment of communities and economies, and the violent assertion of law and social hierarchies of gender, class and race. "Cold War Westerns," according to Corkin, were "concurrently nostalgic and forward looking. They look back upon the glory days of Western settlement as they look ahead to the expression of US centrality in the postwar world" (9). The origin story of the United States of America was *solidified* through the Western, *materialized* in the actions of its heroes and villains, and *naturalized* through its geo-mystical symbolic locations, and this article will focus on the ways in which similar processes translate and mutate in Australian cinema. As a result, a dialogue is formed through which the American Western talks to and exchanges with other cinemas both as influence and as beneficiary, shaping and being shaped by these many and different relations within a global context (see Kollin). In the terms developed by postcolonial film critic Hamid Naficy, we might view Australia's Westerns as "accented" cinema, that is, a cinema that borrows, alters, and develops tropes from elsewhere to form its own "language" (see Naficy). Writing of the literary relations between the American West and the Australian outback, Tom Lynch has referred to a productive comparative approach of "two mythically charged but ecologically fragile and embattled places" as "a more polyphonic and globally relevant conversation" through which we "study particular places in detail" and "also analyze how local places are integrated into and express larger global forces and processes" ("Strange Lands" 698; "'Nothing but Land'" 379). Through engaging with the "local places" of David Michôd's *The Rover* (2013) this article will explore some of the ways in which this dialogic relationship uses detail, place and intense echoes of the Western to interrogate global themes and concerns. Rather than an exhausted genre, this article (as in this special edition as a whole), argues for the continued *worlding* appeal of the Western as a mutable and flexible form which can become an ever more complex, critical lens through which to articulate

and examine national anxieties and change within a global context (see Higgins, Keresztesi and Oscherwitz). Michôd himself described *The Rover* as a "mytho-poetic art Western," stripped down to its raw, "elemental" aspects, through which he was consciously "playing with the tropes" of the genre to reflect upon the consequences of both settler-colonialism's legacies and geo-political economic and environmental shifts (DVD audio commentary).

In this discussion of *The Rover* I wish to address some of the issues outlined above through developing my earlier work on what I termed the "post-Western." The book *Post-Westerns* (2013) had a broad aim to refute Gilles Deleuze's contention in *Cinema 1* that post-1945 American cinema was limited because "All the aesthetic or even political qualities that it can have remain narrowly critical" of region and nation because it is, in different ways, always "striving to save the remains of the American dream," opting too often for weak parody or for the limp criticism of institutions and apparatuses rather than to offer a more comprehensive critical analysis through a "project of positive creation." Deleuze felt that rather than being undone and transformed, the clichés that defined the genre, although "maltreated, mutilated, destroyed," were "not slow to be reborn from its ashes" (215). For Deleuze, America's greatest film genres, like the Western, might appear to "collapse" through revisionism and new formulations during the immediate postwar period, and yet ultimately, he argues, they simply "maintain their empty frame" (215). *Post-Westerns* argued, however, that this frame was far from empty and that the Western, rather than totally collapse, actually found a "project of positive creation" through which to interrogate the very ideological frameworks that had established it so centrally in the American psyche in the first place. What I am developing here is the idea that this frame extended, like Butch Cassidy's big idea, to places beyond the USA, and was put to use in the service of new and different political struggles over identity, gender, nationhood, ethnicity, and the various anxieties of settler-colonial culture, testifying to Susan Kollin's contention that "the popular Western is not a monolithic genre but a divided and contested form that has the ability to articulate ideas across the political spectrum" (1). It is revealing that *The Rover* begins with the caption "Australia, ten years after the collapse" as if pointing to Deleuze's comment above on the Western genre itself, as though the film is in part a meditation on an era emerging *after* the weakening of apparent certainties, such as patriarchy, national identity, and capitalism previously bolstered by the structures, ideologies and narratives of the more conventional, classic Western. After the collapse of the genre's certainties, a new, different and fluid form appears, that, in Jacques Derrida's terms, can "participate without belonging" to its original source (59). For Michôd, this is why the Western provides such a usable frame through which to examine the existential and political themes of *The Rover* as a "post-collapse" movie, existing at a "post-Western" moment in the sense of both moving beyond the classic generic markers and beyond its association only

with the USA and to reflect on the cultural collapse (or critique) of broader set-tler-colonial or "Western" myths and ideologies within the wider context of global "geo-political shifts" (DVD audio commentary).

However, to move forward with this idea we must first go back briefly to the problem of the prefix "post" which is critical to any discussion of what I am call-ing post-Western cinema because contained within the debates surrounding it much can be revealed about the relationships of the Western to its "past" and to its "fu-ture." Commenting on the use of "post" in contemporary culture, and particularly in post-colonialism, Stuart Hall argues (following Ella Shohat) that it "signals both the 'closure of a certain historical event or age' and a 'going beyond… commenting upon a certain intellectual movement'" (253). Hall comments that Shohat leans to-wards the "going beyond" in her version, whereas Peter Hulme sees the notion of the post-colonial as signifying an important and productive tension between "a tem-poral dimension in which there is a punctual relationship in time between… a col-ony and a post-colonial state; and a critical dimension in which… post-colonial theory comes into existence through a critique of a body of theory" (Hulme qtd in Hall 253). Hall's point is that Shohat's view of the "post-colonial" attempts to be "both epistemic and chronological," making it different from other "posts," where-as he prefers to see it as part of the same process: as "not only 'after' but 'going beyond'" the colonial, as post-modernism is both "going beyond" and "after" mod-ernism, and post-structuralism both follows chronologically and achieves its theor-etical gains "on the back of structuralism." A similar logic can be usefully employed to discuss the relations and tensions between the Western film and its "post" forms as both going beyond and coming after its earlier "classic" structures and themes. To borrow the phrasing Hall uses, "It is because the relations which characterised the… [classic Western] are no longer in the same place and relative position, that we are able not simply to oppose them but to critique, to deconstruct and try to 'go beyond' them." Drawing on Antonio Gramsci and Jacques Derrida, Hall goes on to argue for this sense of the "post" as a means of articulating "a shift or transition con-ceptualised as the *reconfiguration of the field*, rather than as the movement of linear transcendence between two mutually exclusive states" (253; emphasis added). The prefix "post," therefore and crucially, does not simply mean overcoming the "past" and therefore, when used in the term "post-Western," signifies "a process of disen-gagement" from the system it is in tension with (the Westerns of the past), but in the full knowledge that it is "probably inescapable" from that system as well. Hence any sense of the Western and its "post-Western" forms "never operated in a purely binary way" but always interact, overlap and interrelate in complex dialogical ways as forms of ghostliness by which the present is haunted and marked by the past, both historically and generically (Hall 253, 254, 246). This is particularly relevant in this article's development of the "post-Western" or "ghost-Western" in a distinctly Australian context because, as outlined above, there is a strong dialogical relation

between settler-colonial cultures working through the anxieties of dominance and oppression in the context of wider global shifts. In Lynch's words, "settler colonialism envisions the world and its relationship to it in a particular way and generates a hegemonic discourse and symbolic system to enforce that perspective" ("'Nothing but Land'" 380). If Australian cinema *refers* to the American Western, it does so in multiple and critical ways; perhaps to parallel similar political experiences or to see the differences and nuances in the conditions of the two nations, or to see larger themes and issues running through settler-colonial cultures and their afterlives.

As Limbrick and others have argued, Australian cinema has historical parallels with the territory of the Western, going back to the bushranger films of the 1900s to the 1920s where the frontier outback became the site for the expression of masculinity with bushrangers and drovers taking the place of cowboys. As Robert Hughes put it in his cultural history of Australia *The Fatal Shore*, "By taking to the bush, the convict left England and entered Australia" (243), thereby asserting the direct connection between national identity formation and the outback or "bush" echoing Owen Wister's contention that the "cowpuncher" was an Anglo Saxon transplanted into the conditions of the frontier to become a true American (Wister). Limbrick, therefore, sees settler-colonial cinema as "the process of white subjects dominating space and others" (69) and yet, as Cavanagh and Veracini have argued, "there is no such thing as neo-settler colonialism or post-settler colonialism because settler-colonialism is a resilient formation that rarely ends" (qtd in Lynch, "'Nothing but Land'" 377). In this sense, therefore, a film like *The Rover* is not moving *beyond* settler-colonialism, but, as a "post-collapse Western," rather engaging fully with its ongoing consequences as a complex and resonant "process" haunting Australian culture. One of the characteristics of the post-Western, as I have discussed it elsewhere, is its concerted interest in the "aftermath" and "afterlives" of the ideological consequences of such a frontier or Western movement. Rather dismissively, Jonathan Romney called the film "a tight-lipped, hyper-atmospheric exercise in that neo-spaghetti Western style you might call 'Phony Leone'" (Romney), and yet a closer examination of *The Rover* suggests a much more complex relationship with post-Western concerns and consequences. To borrow a phrase used by Fiona Probyn (derived from Homi Bhabha) *The Rover* is a film that "resembles but menaces" (Probyn) in its dialogic use of the Western, playing with its tropes in a manner that permits a darker, political vision to emerge. Resemblance becomes a strategic opening in *The Rover* by which expectations are established, denied and then critiqued, shifting the viewer through an experience, in Bhabha's terms, from "*mimicry…* to *menace*" (Bhabha 91; italics in the original).

The Rover opens by juxtaposing a harsh desert landscape and horizon viewed through a car windscreen followed by a close-up of a disheveled, dirty, bewildered, middle-aged Guy Pearce, as if immediately connecting the two; binding them together in a critical relationship of land and identity. Whatever this is, wherever we are, and whoever this man might be, they are intrinsically related "ten years

after the collapse," as the caption tells us ominously. Nation, place and person *after* the collapse is established in this one sequence as if to define some terrible crisis wherein "the landscape is no longer the template of an untroubled national identity grounded in European modernity" (Collins and Davis 92), but something brutal, threatening, and unpredictable. This binding relationship of characters and land is emphasized in the film's color palette which utilizes earth tones, right down to the dust-laden clothes Pearce wears and the muddy car that forms his quest-object. Appropriately, given my use of the term "ghost-Western" to describe *The Rover*, Michôd claims this earthiness was a deliberate decision to make the character feel "like a ghost who barely exists" and to add generally to the "haunting" landscape of abandonment and ruin within the film (DVD audio commentary). But this also establishes a central structuring device which Michôd has defined as about "very elemental characters in an almost empty landscape" (DVD audio commentary), since it begins with the earth, air, and water — as Pearce stops to buy a bottle of scarce water at the roadside bar — and ends in the penultimate scene with fire, as the same character burns the bodies of the men he has killed in the final shoot-out in a last act of, what Michôd calls, "small redemption, atonement" (DVD audio commentary).

The sparse drama of this opening sequence serves also to remind the viewer of the film's debt to the Western, and Michôd has been clear on this in his comments about *The Rover*:

> I knew that I was treading into territory that wasn't necessarily totally unfamiliar, and kind of walking into the world of the Western. But when I know that I'm doing something that might be formally akin to something — like a Western — I don't go out and start watching Westerns. It's my ultimate aspiration to make something that feels like its own thing, that feels unusual and hopefully feels like a movie that I haven't seen before. (Interview)

So the film shares many of the traits of the Western: open spaces, dusty landscapes, isolated characters, struggling families, small settlements, camp fires, guns, shoot-outs, desperate searching, and violence, and yet, as we shall see, Michôd utilizes them to explore new and different themes. In this sense, Pearce's character inhabits the Western trope of Clint Eastwood's Man With No Name (even though he is named "Eric" in the credits, the name is never used within the film), cut adrift in a harsh, pitiless landscape where things no longer seem to add up and all certainty has been removed and replaced by disorientation and surreality, like the unbearably loud Cambodian love song that infuses this opening scene. Yet his journey will be revealed as circular, brutal and destructive with only the faintest flickering of redemption. The production notes for the film describe Eric as "a shell of anger and ennui" and sets out the film's thematic terrain as about "the rapacious capacity for under-regulated Western economies to destroy themselves," the "shifting balance of global power," and "human greed and environmental destruction" (Production Notes). This is a near-future world that "mirrors the Australian and American

gold rushes of the 19th century" in which Australia has become a "resource-rich Third World country like Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria or Guinea" where its mines draw peoples from all over the world into a frontier-like space where law and order has dissolved in the scramble for survival. This is a "two-tier economy" of haves and have-nots where the infrastructure is barely functioning in the dusty towns the film travels through and where mineral wealth is transported vast distances on trains with Chinese characters printed on their sides, guarded by heavily armed security contractors imitating the "to and fro of geo-political shifts — [because] people go where the money is" (DVD audio commentary). The scars of this economic system of disembodied global capital can be seen both in the lives of those surviving precariously on the periphery as well as on the landscape itself, as in the scene where Eric stops and stares through a chain-link fence into a massive, gnarled open mine where extractive industries have stripped out coal and other minerals to feed the distant industries and economies that exists beyond the frame of the film. Such ecological damage exists as a terrifying given in the film, an inevitable product of a society wedded to the dream of progress, since as Patrick Wolfe claims, under settler-colonialism, "invasion is a structure not an event" (*Settler Colonialism* 163), played out in multifaceted ways and persisting way into the future. If, as Wolfe argues, "Settler colonialism was foundational to modernity" (*Settler Colonialism* 8) linking remote colonial frontiers to the metropolis through chains of exploitation, finance and territorialism, then "behind it all lay the driving engine of international market forces" and it is these forces under scrutiny in *The Rover*'s post-collapse interrogation of the consequences of modernity's imperatives.

Eric's anger and ennui, or what Michôd calls his "jaded resentment" with the world the film slowly reveals, relates to his deep sense of loss and disappointment provoking his violent responses to an increasingly puzzling and desperate situation (DVD audio commentary). Once a soldier and then a farmer, he has lost his land and his family, killing his wife and her lover and leaving with nothing but the Holden Commodore car which is stolen in the opening scene from outside the Cambodian bar. The touchstones of settler-colonialism Eric once represented: soldier, farmer, husband, land-owner and productive citizen have been undone before the film begins and are best summed up in his minimalist statement, "I was a farmer and now I'm here." As a post-collapse post-Western *The Rover* explores "here" as the diminishment of settler-colonial mythologies and certainties, "a limit to settler occupation and settler understanding of the land" (Probyn) in the face of its inversion in this new/old Australian landscape, tracking Eric's efforts to retrieve his one possession from a gang of misfits who steal it after their truck crashes.

Unlike many examples in new Australian cinema (see Rayner; Probyn; McFarlane and Mayer) the settler has no guidance from an Aboriginal figure (akin to the loyal Native American in some U.S. Westerns). The knowledgeable tracker

who might be expected to accompany Eric on his journey is replaced with the slow-witted, mumbling, southern American Rey (Robert Pattinson). In the world of this meandering Western/road/journey movie, *The Rover*, indigeneity has been subsumed into an all-encompassing battle of survival in which native identity is just a fragment in the complex, diasporic mosaic the film hints at through its use of multiple languages and accents: Cambodian, Mandarin, American, Australian, and African. Existing on the periphery, in communities whose infrastructure is, at best, basic and barely functioning, the film's diasporic population are equally linked by their determined and desperate efforts to compete for and harness resources to survive. Any assumption of inevitable social and economic progress as the marker of settler-colonial power and authority is interrupted in this film, whether in the stuttering journey itself or in the fleeting portrayal of society "after the collapse" where, despite obvious mineral wealth for some, the majority exist in places where water comes only in bottles and buckets, fuel in Jerri cans, and food bought only with American dollars in tin cans and cooked over open fires.

Although Michôd refers to the Western, he is never confined by it, echoing Derrida's notion of "participation without belonging," preferring instead to play with its tropes whilst engaging the audience, and enabling his own vision to emerge. For example, after the theft of Eric's car and the chase that ensues, the director is deliberately "setting up expectations of an action movie" through the driving principle of the Western hero and the train of events he initiates. However, as Michôd says, "it isn't such a film at all," but rather a "mytho-poetic art Western" that upsets and reverses the very expectations it appears to establish (DVD audio commentary). As the film will demonstrate, Eric is no action-hero and events are not tied to or resolved by his clear progress or path through its episodes. As above, the film reverses the familiar trope of the American Western as a site of hard-won, inevitable progress, of frontier settlement and development, of the Manifest Destiny of white settlers taming a hostile, alien landscape and establishing civilization, becoming what Michôd has termed "de-evolution" whereby society, morality, culture and "everything is going downhill" (DVD extras documentary). One way this "de-evolution" is emphasized is through the film's sound design and soundtrack in which Michôd required "a quality of disintegration… music that was falling apart" (DVD audio commentary), manifested as haunting whines, pulses, and jangles suggesting an eerie, edgy world of discordant fragments.

A precise example of how this "de-evolution" relates to Michôd's use of the Western, is how the family unit, as an archetypal motif of frontier life and settler--colonial culture, is represented here as in decline or transformation through a series of alternative, dysfunctional "families" that reflect the inversions of certainty and the film's critique of once unassailable myth. Thus the gang that steals Eric's car represents an odd hybrid male family of age, ethnicity, and nationality (Australian, American, African) whose first words to Eric are appropriately "What do you want

brother?" It transpires one of their "family," Rey, has been left for dead after a failed robbery, and it is he who will form an unlikely partnership with Eric in their search for the missing car and brother, Henry. In the film, social structures have become fragmented and deformed in this new terrain where alternative families and tribal groups struggle to survive economic change and uncertainty, all of which is ably demonstrated in the next section of the film when Eric tries to buy a gun at a roadside establishment.

This is a dark, haunted space of gothic shadows occupied by a matriarch, "Grandma" (Gillian Jones), overseeing what appears to be a brothel, as she offers a "boy" (possibly her Grandson) for Eric to sleep with, while sitting knitting by the lace-curtained window looking out onto the world from which he materializes. Surrounded by the only traces of homeliness we see in the entire film (tea cups, photographs, ornaments, and a vase of flowers) she asks "What's your name sweetheart?" repeatedly to Eric's silence. "I'll call you my baby," she eventually retorts in a further parodic inversion of family life and "normality" that fills this scene. The brothel is partly occupied by "Jacobson Brothers Circus" performers whose carnival has come to rest in the dusty, roadside town, and one, a tattooed dwarf, offers to sell Eric the gun he needs for $300. As he does not have enough American dollars, the only currency accepted in the post-collapse world of global exchange, he murders the dwarf and takes the handgun anyway. In this unforgivingly surreal scene, the spirit of the carnivalesque is oddly evoked as a Bakhtinian reminder of inversion and parody, of a world turned upside down with all its once established values uncrowned and laid bare in the process. Returning to Grandma, Eric threatens her with the gun only to find her calm, philosophical response disarming and puzzling, "The only detail I can tell you is the detail that pertains to this place," becoming like an "oracle" or "quasi long-lost mother figure" (DVD audio commentary): "You must really love that car… What is it you're so worked up about in this day and age?" It is as if she sees the futility of Eric's journey and his isolation, offering him the brief possibility of some human intimacy within the terrible precarity of "this day and age" that she seems to understand so well. As the scene ends, the camera lingers on Eric's increasingly tearful eyes once again as they puzzle over her comments, turning them over in his mind, as if confronting him with the pointlessness and loss he feels inside.

The myth of "building 'home' in a disputed space" that Limbrick associated with settler-colonial culture has become a desperate and violent struggle in which family life, motherhood, kinship, economic trade and exchange are all inverted and perverted. As Eric emerges from the brothel, he reluctantly saves Rey and joins forces with him in his search for his car forming another of the film's odd pairings and surrogate families. Like a post-collapse Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid they strike up an uneasy and unlikely bond that develops as the journey progresses through episodes along the road where each gradually and tentatively reveals

a little more of themselves. As the Western and the road movie blend, *The Rover* becomes a terrible anti-*bildungsroman* in which the traditional notion of education and becoming (see Bakhtin 19) is inverted so there is no sense of "emergence," "transition," or "change" (Bakhtin 23) since the world of *The Rover* is already too damaged with characters trapped in an unalterable "de-evolved" destiny of collapse, decline, and survivalism.

Each stopping place on the journey within the *The Rover* offers moments of challenge and revelation, like the female doctor who patches up Rey and gives shelter to the two outlaws. Throughout Eric's journey he is confronted by allegorical family members: Grandma as his mother, Rey as a brother or son, and the doctor as a reminder of his murdered wife. In a rare moment of concern and sympathy in the "tough but idyllic" homestead of the doctor, Eric responds to the caged dogs she has rescued from the desert and people trying to eat them, seeing in them, one assumes, something of his own plight and circumstance. Later this sequence makes more sense as we discover that within Eric's car is the body of his own dog that he had intended to bury out in the desert at the opening of the film before his car was stolen. Living a solitary life, the doctor is a rare female presence in the film, managing to survive self-sufficiently in the bleak landscape with her Aboriginal partner, until Eric and Rey bring inevitable violence crashing into her world.

As the unlikely relationship develops between Rey and Eric, with a trace of Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley in *The Searchers*, we learn fragments of their previous lives, particularly as Rey tells of growing up on a farm before working in the mines. In what Michôd terms "tiny little moments of bonding" (DVD audio commentary), Rey recalls a story about neighbors rolling tractors down a hill to get them started to take his mind off his accidental killing of a young girl. Eric asks "Why are you telling me this?" to which Rey replies "I just remembered it" and "Not everything has to mean something." But such instants of memory and idle talk are meaningless to Eric who is totally caught up in his own shame, guilt and loss and can only retort "never stop thinking about a life you've taken, it's the price you pay for taking it." What Eric feels is the torment for the murders he has committed but never been punished for, something he confesses to the soldier in a later scene after being arrested. With no redeeming justice, all Eric offers Rey is this terrible advice, and certainly not the surrogate brotherly bonding the latter wants. Instead, Eric, in his longest speech in the film, warns him of a Godless world where the ties of loyalty cannot be relied upon, and all one has is one's self:

> I'll tell you what God's given you. He's put a bullet in you and he's abandoned you out here to me. He feels nothing for you. He couldn't give a fuck if you died tomorrow. God gave you a brother who's not waiting for you. He gave you a brother who's not even thinking about you right now. Just 'cause you and him came out of the same woman's hole... The only thing that means anything right now is that I'm here and he's not. Your brother left you to die. That's what people do. You don't learn to fight, your death's going to come real soon.

In these dark words Eric's internal pain, contained through much of the film, spills out and prepares us for the final shoot-out between him, Rey and Henry's gang. Just as the film has *remembered* the American Western throughout, this final sequence echoes back to many gunfights in many Westerns and yet here, crucially, little is resolved and there is none of the "regeneration through violence" often associated with earlier frontier tales. The violence here is clumsy and accidentally induced as Rey confronts his own brother forcing Eric to kill two of the gang before killing Henry. In the final moment of familial surrogacy in *The Rover*, Eric looks on the last surviving man, an elderly father-figure sitting vulnerably on a bed staring back with eyes as empty and pained as Eric's have been throughout the film. As if gazing into a future mirror at himself, alone and lost, Eric refuses to kill the old man in the first faltering moment of "atonement" in this sequence. The second is Eric's decision to burn the bodies in an act of purgation that "cleans up the mess" he has made as a "small redemption" (DVD audio commentary) that clears the ground allowing the film to return to where it began: to Eric, his car, and the landscape. And yet the film does not finish at this exact point of purging, for it moves towards a "coda or epilogue" in which we see Eric remove his dead dog from the car and take it out into the desert to bury. Michôd calls this the "last thing for which he had true and intimate affection" (DVD audio commentary) and he is about to bury it below the earth, as if shutting away the last semblance of his empathy and care. Almost a continuation of the fire that purges in the previous scene, Eric now closes the elemental circle of the film — earth to earth, ashes to ashes — and one assumes in so doing, buries the remaining meaningful fragment of his past life.

David Michôd walked into the world of the Western, as I have argued throughout this article, but wanted ultimately "to make something that feels like its own thing, that feels unusual and hopefully feels like a movie that I haven't seen before" (Interview). Above all the emphasis on "feels" in this statement suggests the visceral, affective quality of *The Rover* as we follow Eric's journey across its hyper-elemental landscapes. However, these feelings are conveyed not verbally or physically for there is little speech and no intimate contact (except as violence), but rather through his gestures of gazing at the world as it confronts him. Pearce's eyes dominate the screen throughout, conveying a range of emotions from bewilderment and confusion to anger, hate, pain, shame, and tearful sorrow as he surveys a broken, disorientating world through which he moves like a disconnected specter. His eyes reveal his internal torment as he struggles with a world no longer ordered by the values of settler-colonial life he was raised within and benefitted from. Having lost his authority and family as emblems of this previous life, his code of values has become shrunken and distilled into its most callous, brutal, survivalist form within a landscape of ecological ruin and global financial turmoil. Eric cannot "ride off into the sunset" like a classical Western hero because, like so many of the

film's Western tropes, Michôd refuses unquestioned clarity in favor of a darker ambivalence constituted of shards of atonement and redemption amid an unforgiving landscape of violence, loss, and circularity. Death haunts *The Rover*, and would be the elusive punishment Eric seeks for his own crimes from a justice system that, like the entire social and cultural infrastructure within the film, barely functions. So Eric remains alive, outside justice, unpunished, with his ultimate fate to continue to exist and wander in his own ironic *terra nullius* (nobody's land), a peripheral space in which remote global power has abandoned the hinterland to those accommodated to its harsh environments. As Grayson Cooke argues, "A cinema dedicated to questioning national identity seems like the perfect space for a reflective, nuanced Australian Western" (Cooke) and Michôd's *The Rover* certainly both continues this tradition whilst extending the interrogation outward, deploying and manipulating its tropes to explore a transnational globalized future world built hauntingly on the ruins of modernity and its intimately linked settler-colonialist mythology.

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"WALKING INTO THE WORLD OF THE WESTERN": DAVID MICHÔD'S *THE ROVER* AS AUSTRALIAN POST-WESTERN

Summary

This article argues that David Michôd's *The Rover* is a "post-Western" film in the sense that it utilizes Western tropes to explore the consequences of settler-colonialism in a global context. Whilst "remembering" the US Western its use of its attributes helps analyze family, land-use, capitalism, masculinity and loss in a transnational, globalized world.

„WCHODZĄC W ŚWIAT WESTERNU"
— *ROVER* DAVIDA MICHÔDA
JAKO AUSTRALIJSKI POSTWESTERN

Streszczenie

Artykuł przekonuje, że film Davida Michôda *The Rover* jest z gatunku postwesternu w tym sensie, iż wykorzystuje westernowe toposy w celu zbadania konsekwencji osadnictwa kolonialnego w kontekście ogólnoświatowym. Jeśli się pamięta amerykański western, zastosowanie jego cech pomaga w analizie rodziny, gospodarowania ziemią, kapitalizmu, męskości i utraty w ponadnarodowym, zglobalizowanym świecie.

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