



This is a repository copy of *Adapting Australian Film: Ray Lawrence from Bliss to Jindabyne*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/90918/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Rayner, J.R. (2009) Adapting Australian Film: Ray Lawrence from Bliss to Jindabyne. *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 3 (3). pp. 295-308. ISSN 1750-3175

[https://doi.org/10.1386/sac.3.3.295\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/sac.3.3.295_1)

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## Adapting Australian Film: Ray Lawrence from Bliss to Jindabyne

Jonathan Rayner, University of Sheffield

This paper considers Ray Lawrence's feature films in the light of their status as literary adaptations, as celebrated and critically rewarded examples of Australian film art, and as the work of a filmmaker paradoxically perhaps more active and acclaimed as a maker of television adverts. The achievement of Lawrence and his collaborators (producers, screenwriters and actors) has been to create films which bridge or elide the distinctions between elitist art and popular genre filmmaking: the hybrid forms and multifaceted narratives of the director's films reflect the pervasive Gothic qualities of Australian film, and their inherent likeness to the characteristics of art cinema. Examination of the adaptation process sheds light on specific national content or emphasis within these internationally successful productions, and on the adaptation of the Australian cinema itself to changing aesthetic and commercial conditions.

Key words: Lawrence Gothic Art Adaptation Auteur

This paper offers a reconsideration of the films and career of Ray Lawrence, a critically acclaimed Australian director whose most recent film *Jindabyne* was a national and international successes in 2006. Although to date his output consists of just three feature films completed since 1985, Lawrence's work can be seen to embody, unite and typify several disparate ideals, debates, and tendencies present within Australian filmmaking over the past twenty years. On the surface, Lawrence's three features vary greatly in their tones, emphases and settings. His first film *Bliss* (1985) is blackly comedic, occasionally horrific, often surreal and highly subjective in its depiction of a middle-aged, middle-class man suffering a heart attack, questioning

his existence, and losing and regaining his faith. *Lantana*, which appeared a full sixteen years later, portrays the diverse reactions of a diffuse web of Sydney-based characters to the disappearance of a female therapist. *Jindabyne* scrutinises the disintegration of a marriage and a wider community following the discovery of a murder victim in a remote region of the Snowy Mountains.

These film narratives, although set in motion by comparable traumatic events, encompass different geographical locations and distinct social milieux, and offer specific, subjective definitions of resolution and redemption for their protagonists. The title of the first one describes a transcendent, spiritual and emotional state, that of the second a tangled and intractable (significantly non-native) shrub, and the third an Australian town whose physical location, moral framework and communal values appear to be fluid, uncertain or shifted as a result of one extraordinary, disruptive occurrence. Besides being linked by their auteur-director, the films are connected by their derivation from literary sources: they are all adaptations, from a novel, a play and a short story respectively. While adaptation from literature has been one of the most common and conservative trends in the cinema globally as well as in Australia, these films, through their wide spacing in time, exemplify the adaptations and developments in the Australian cinema itself over the past three decades as much as they reflect the continuities in their director's work. As such, Lawrence's films can be used to illustrate industrial and aesthetic 'adaptations' (in the evolutionary sense) in contemporary Australian cinema.

Although inevitably they have come to be associated strongly with their director, Lawrence's films share a basis in alternative authorships, because of their common derivation from literary sources. For *Bliss* and *Lantana*, Lawrence worked closely with the original novelist and playwright to craft his films' screenplays. Although there are distinct commercial advantages to basing films on bestsellers,

there are and have always been more artistic and aspirational associations connected to films derived from well-known books and plays. Lawrence's repeated recourse to literary sources in the formulation of an individualistic auteurist signature suggests an adept union of mutually beneficial artistic and commercial imperatives.

In terms of his standing within the Australian film industry, and his perceived importance to the national film culture, Lawrence and his films have been the recipients of an unusually high number of awards and nominations in national contexts, and in addition have garnered significant international recognition. The small number of films that Lawrence has made over the past twenty years (with the long periods of apparent inactivity), and his preference for realist observation of social minutiae, produce an aura of selectivity and perfectionism in his filmmaking. This prompts comparisons between Lawrence's films and those of historical heavyweight art cinema directors such as Carl Theodor Dreyer, or Australasian contemporaries such as Vincent Ward or Paul Cox, which in turn seems to presuppose or encourage a connoisseurship in their viewing. However, the gaps in Lawrence's filmography actually reflect his employment and success within an entirely different creative area (advertising), for which he has also received awards and recognition, for his work within the Sydney Film Company. Where the fallow periods in many directors' filmmaking careers may hide profitable but generally unacknowledged employment in advertising, in Lawrence's case the feature films appear as the personal distractions from his principal profession.

The associations of auteur status are borne out by the thematic consistency and structural similarity of Lawrence's films. All three foreground crises of faith and commitment, and focus unwaveringly on ordinary people and everyday relationships transformed by trauma, disillusionment and suspicion. In the second and third films, there is a prominent commitment to social realism, a naturalism in performance and

an observational shooting style. In his dedication to realism, and his persistent examination of subjective experience, Lawrence's cinema clearly occupies the tradition territory of art cinema. The conscious crafting of complex narrative situations, and the exploration of the moral and spiritual dilemmas they entail, also generates a paradoxical Bergmanesque tone of parable or exemplar. Alongside this, there is a marked recognition of the nationality of the characters and settings, in Australian cities and rural regions, with the Australian-ness of the majority of the characters highlighting and highlighted by the (again, apparently conscious and commercial) inclusion of American actors in *Lantana* and *Jindabyne*.

The large number of nominations and awards which Lawrence's films have received is a noteworthy feature over his career. His feature releases have collected an unusual, even disproportionate degree of attention and recognition within the filmmaking establishment. *Bliss* received thirteen AFI nominations and won awards in the categories of Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay (which Lawrence shared with Peter Carey). *Lantana* garnered seven awards (including Best Film, Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay) from a similar number of nominations, with an additional screenwriting prize being awarded to Andrew Bovell. *Jindabyne* received nine nominations (again including recommendations in the Best Film, Director and Adapted Screenplay categories, as well as for Best Leading Actor and Actress), but won no awards. Lawrence was nominated in the AFI Best Director category for each film, and for the Film Critics Circle of Australia Best Director award for *Lantana* and *Jindabyne*, winning in the latter case. In 2004 (i.e. even before the release of *Jindabyne*), Lawrence was the recipient of an Outstanding Achievement Award from the Australian Screen Directors' Association. The high number of nominations for both *Bliss* and *Lantana* was rewarded with numerous awards for the director, his collaborators and the leading actors, particularly in the

case of *Lantana*. *Bliss* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival (as did *Jindabyne*) and was nominated for the Palme d'Or before it returned home for its Australian Film Institute nominations. This scenario of foreign praise pre-empting local recognition also characterised the carefully managed circulation of a later commercially- and critically-successful Australian release, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994).<sup>1</sup> By comparison, *Jindabyne*'s many nominations and comparatively few (markedly international rather than national) awards might be interpreted as reflecting an anticipation of quality in the Australian critical establishment, which was precipitated by the impact of Lawrence's previous features. With this disparity in mind, it is worth considering the individual films in greater detail.

## **Bliss**

Lawrence's first feature was adapted from Peter Carey's best-seller of 1981. The director and the novelist collaborated closely on the preparation of the screenplay. Unlike the majority of contemporary Australian feature productions, *Bliss* seems superficially at least to evade a simple generic classification, and so appears even more to be an individualistic, auteur-director's film. Its reception at Cannes reinforces this impression, and many aspects of its profile are suggestive of an art cinema positioning. However, other responses and categorisations are worth further examination.

To overcome the film's oddness of tone and content, for distribution in the United States New World Pictures' advertising packaged *Bliss* as a black comedy. The poster image features an elephant sitting on a small car, a partially dressed

woman in a sexy pose, and a man's moustachioed face, smiling beatifically from a cloud. It may be difficult to recognise Lawrence's film from this visual shorthand, beyond Harry Joy's (Barry Otto) death and resurrection, the comic incident of Harry's car being squashed by an elephant, and his sexual affair with Honey Barbara (Helen Jones). These selective images do encapsulate the surreality, self-reflexivity and subjectivity of Lawrence's film, and certainly at times *Bliss* does function as a comedy because of its incongruous, nightmarish imagery and its mockery of mundane, middle-class life. The comedy is supported by many conspicuous narrative techniques: a highly ironic, distancing voice-over; subjective vision and narration which sometimes shares and sometimes obscures the perspective of Harry Joy; and a self-conscious, self-reflexive style, which embraces characters addressing the camera directly. Needless to say, such features are atypical within mainstream, popular cinema.

However, most if not all of these textual characteristics are equally appropriate to a classification of *Bliss* in line with an orthodox art cinema reading. The main character's experience, his conscious and subconscious grasp of his circumstances, and their rendering through highly subjective and self-reflexive techniques, conform to the definition of art cinema narrative (as Harry's initially anonymous voice-over points out in a convoluted, self-conscious aside, 'This is a story about a fellow who told stories'). These materials and techniques also support and drive the film's spiritual dimension in its story of faith, doubt and redemption. The enigmatic still from the film chosen for the cover of the VHS release (of 'the Vision Splendid' of Harry's mother holding aloft a golden cross as she traverses a flooded town in a rowing boat) illustrates the conspicuous religious matter contained within the film's subjectively-motivated images.

As a third, in some ways unifying categorisation, *Bliss* can be placed within

the category of Australian Gothic. While this category within Australian cinema is an amorphous and contestable grouping, which has included rural, urban, horror, science fiction, road movie and thriller narratives, there is an overriding thematic unity to the Gothic which links seemingly disparate texts (Thomas and Gillard 2003). Bliss's combination of violence and comedy are reminiscent of earlier Gothic films, and such hybridity is in itself a Gothic characteristic, manifested in the willingness to mix and subvert conventions from several genres. This self-conscious approach lends itself to parody and irony. Gothic films which may superficially appear to belong in different generic categories are united by three narrative and thematic continuities. These are: a questioning of establishment authority; a disillusionment with the social reality which that authority maintains; and a subsequent search for a valid and tenable identity once the true nature of the human environment has been revealed (Rayner 2000: 25)

We can see these narrative and thematic elements in place in *Bliss*. Harry Joy suffers a heart attack, and is suddenly awakened to his family's vices and his own guilty compromises. He then feels compelled to reject the roles, goals and duties of his social positioning in order to redeem himself and those around him. In this way, the personal trauma and existential reappraisal of the subjective art cinema narrative (what has been identified as the 'boundary situation' for the art cinema protagonist) is also the personal situation of the entrapped Australian Gothic character (Bordwell 1988: 207-8). Again, Harry's voice-over demonstrates this overlapping of Gothic and art cinema materials: 'Harry Joy was conducting tests to establish if he was really in Hell or whether he was mad. He began by hoping he was mad, and these were not his real family, but clever imitations placed there to torment him.' The Gothic's thematic scenario is in fact also the art cinema protagonist's dilemma, and the Gothic film's propensity towards hybridity, self-consciousness, social and



institutional criticism, subjectivity and open-endedness creates an ironic art cinema-by-default within Australian film, from abidingly generic materials.

To underline this tonal and generic 'problem' with *Bliss*, but also to illustrate the convergence of Gothic, genre and art cinema strands, we might compare Lawrence's film with its near-contemporary in American cinema, *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986). Like *Bliss*, Lynch's film is highly subjective and reflexive in style, presents us with a similar de-stabilisation of the parochial and the mundane caused by the irruption of the horrific and the abject, and alludes to, mixes and subverts more familiar and predictable genres (film noir, detective thrillers, even musicals) in its outlandish events, brutal misogyny and calculatedly unspecific timeframe. It is not intended to be reductive to assert in this context that, by comparison, Lynch's output could also be categorised as an American Gothic-Art cinema, uniting the tropes and touchstones of familiar genres and the style and subjectivity of the art film, in an enervating, oblique and hybridised form. Like *Bliss*, *Blue Velvet* excavates the violence and taboos hidden within the everyday, and probes abjection in its examination of the human body, and its desires, disintegration and decay. The scenes in *Bliss* which depict Harry's heart surgery, his stay in hospital, the bizarre and crude physical manifestation of his wife's infidelity, and his troubled convalescence at home are, in retrospect, the most Lynchian, in their black humour, oneiric logic, hellish imagery and subjective vision. While the film's depiction of mental and physical degeneration of the family and the individual are thus in keeping with characteristic Gothic themes and narratives, its promise of final enlightenment, redemption and salvation sidesteps the nihilism of the Gothic, and instead looks forward to the possibility of second chances for the realistically-depicted social groups portrayed in Lawrence's subsequent films.

## **Lantana**

Lawrence's second film, which received greater critical recognition than *Bliss*, poses the same problems of generic placement. In its narrative and tonal shifts and, like *Bliss*, in its advertising, it straddles several categories and genres. On one hand, it resembles an art film about the intricacies of adult interactions, in which all outward actions and personal choices can appear obscure, and on the other it appears to be a mystery, a whodunnit which distracts us from the relevant facts with its emphasis on a veiled network of unspecific relationships. Publicity material for the film also seeks to mobilise this ambiguity: an abiding blue tone for *Lantana*'s poster art suggests the emotionally down-beat nature of its examination of adult relationships, but image content seeks to stress both the art film and thriller materials. Although the majority of the frame is taken up with the heads and shoulders of a man and a woman nearly silhouetted in a close embrace, isolated in the lower right corner there is also a smaller, enigmatic image, redolent of road-based Gothic danger, of a lone woman trying to flag down a car at night.

Again, as in the case of *Bliss*, there was a close collaboration between the writer of the original play and the director in the creation of the screenplay. In 1996, both Lawrence and producer Jan Chapman attended the Sydney premiere of Andrew Bovell's play *Speaking in Tongues*, and then worked with Bovell to extract the movie from the play text.<sup>2</sup> Previously, Bovell had written the screenplay for *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992). Although on the surface *Lantana* is a thriller which provokes audience speculation as to the resolution of its mystery, fundamentally it is an ensemble drama concerned with the complexity and fragility of relationships. Alternatively, we might conceive of it as an art film which adopts the veneer of a thriller as a commercial insurance policy. (Ironically perhaps, in the light

of this twofold approach, *Lantana* in 2002 and *Jindabyne* in 2007 received recognition at the Cognac Festival du Film Policier). The bridging of the niche and mainstream markets that this conceptual construction implies is perhaps the source of popular comparisons between *Lantana* and its American predecessor *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999). The canniness of this formula can also be seen in *Lantana*'s casting. *Lantana* starred Anthony LaPaglia, Barbara Hershey, Geoffrey Rush and Leah Purcell, and these actors' performances scooped all four of the AFI acting awards (for Best and Supporting Actor and Actress).

Lawrence has commented on the pressure on casting decisions emanating from financiers and felt by filmmakers. His goal for the film was to cast 'people with a profile' that were 'good actors as opposed to movie stars' (Grady 2008). Compromises on casting can be seen as among the most pragmatic choices made to suit the film's commercial potential to its aesthetic needs. On examination, *Lantana* emerges as a particularly adroit solution to this conundrum. La Paglia is a well-known and respected Australian theatre and film actor, whose profile has been assisted considerably by his substantial body of work in American television drama and comedy. Geoffrey Rush's career in Australian theatre may be one motive for his casting in an actor's film, but his familiarity to international art cinema audiences following the Oscar award for *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) is probably equally significant. Leah Purcell is also an important Australian theatrical presence in *Lantana*, while the American actress Barbara Hershey is cast as an unusual foreign element (like the plant of the title) at the heart of the film's narrative situation. Hershey had also worked previously with Jan Chapman, giving an award-winning performance in Jane Campion's adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996).

The woman's disappearance, her place within the emerging pattern of associations, the search and eventual solution to the mystery are not simply devices to

ground and drive the film's examination of the affected relationships. Conversely, the intricate professional, familial and emotional backdrop to the mystery is not just superfluous, distracting detail. Each simultaneously underpins and overlays the other, one complimenting the other in a structural and tonal interplay which invests the performances of recognizable actors and the events of a convoluted narrative with an almost incongruous realism. The film's locations and resultant striking compositions, especially those used subsequently for publicity (a pensive Geoffrey Rush seen in full figure against a background of faded, anonymous urban buildings; an anxious Kerry Armstrong in close-up within a dense thicket of the titular plant) can also be seen to elaborate on the film's dual art-thriller nature, both in terms of form and audience constituency.

In short, through careful selection, emphasis and manipulation in scripting, casting and publicity, *Lantana* was able to function equally well as an art cinema exploration of angst, alienation, loss, and uncertainty - a range of insoluble existential dilemmas - while also maintaining a strong resemblance to a thriller based around a single, central narrative question - a factual mystery which eventually capitulates to investigative reason.

## **Jindabyne**

The conception and structure of *Jindabyne* repeats and embellishes *Lantana*'s dexterous blend of thriller and art film. The literary source for Lawrence's film is a short story by the American writer Raymond Carver ('So much water so close to home'), which had already been adapted to the screen as a component in *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, 1993). (As in the case of David Lynch, Altman's films, as generically unclassifiable, amorphous, art cinema ensemble pieces, provide a striking

and prestigious parallel to Lawrence's lauded output). However, in Lawrence's adaptation, the story undergoes substantial alteration and expansion in order to be relocated and 'naturalised' in Australia.

The casting of *Jindabyne* again seeks to bridge the talents and markets of American and Australian cinema. The leading players (Laura Linney and Gabriel Byrne as the married couple Claire and Stewart) are predominantly associated with their roles in contemporary American cinema. Although originally from Ireland, Gabriel Byrne has based his career in the United States and has appeared most often in American films over the past fifteen years, including independent art cinema-thriller cross-overs such as *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995). As with *Lantana*, the poster image foregrounds the male and female leads, but the close-ups of their opposed faces (Byrne's angled in the left background, Linney's in profile in the right foreground) against the dark background are redolent of the isolation and antagonism of the film's married couple. In support of the lead actors, again there is a strong cast of well-known Australian stage and screen actors. Familiar members of this group (Chris Haywood, Max Cullen, Deborah Lee Furness) connect *Jindabyne* with the previous generations of feature films characterising the Australian national cinema. While clearly possessing a conscious commercial sense wedded to its art cinema inception, *Jindabyne* can also be seen to unite its aspirations as a profitable art film with a commitment to Australian content, cast and craft. In terms of Lawrence's ongoing career, the film represents the maintenance of certain enduring collaborative relationships, and also confirms the thematic and stylistic consistencies, and abiding associations of quality, attached to his status as an auteur director within the national cinema.

The narrative of the discovery of a murdered woman's body by four men on a fishing trip foregrounds two perennial staples of Australian filmmaking: the

attractions and problems of male-to-male relationships, and their provocation of gender conflict in social and familial contexts. In this respect, there are discernible links between *Jindabyne* (and also *Lantana*) and the 'Personal Relations film', an Australian film genre identified by Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka as a trend within the late 1980s and early 1990s. A typical example from Dermody's and Jacka's listing for this category is *High Tide* (Gillian Armstrong, 1987), and later comparable films could include *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989) and *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (Gillian Armstrong, 1991), which also privilege female central characters (Dermody and Jacka 1988, 111-13). Strangely, while asserting that personal relations films 'take Australian cinema no nearer to a capacity for the visionary, excessive, oneiric or marvellous', Dermody and Jacka also include *Bliss* in this category: similarly, their insistence that they represent a suburban, 'sexually "well-behaved" Australia' would exclude Armstrong's and Campion's later films (Dermody and Jacka 1988, op.cit.). In addition to its anguished examination of family life, *Jindabyne* makes eloquent use of its shooting on location to explore the beauty and menace of the natural landscape. This facet of the film, even without the explicit consideration of the ethnic origin of the female murder victim, suggests its investigation of intercultural relationships and ethnic differences in Australia, which can also be seen to extend the narrow and unchallenging focus of the personal relations film as defined in its 1980s manifestation.

If *Lantana* toys with the investigative form to distract the audience from its mystery with the enigmas of human interaction, then *Jindabyne* seems to deliberately short-circuit the suspense and resolution of the crime thriller. Opening with a tantalisingly incomplete vision of violent crime, the film subsequently goads viewers with glimpses of the murderer at large. The builder Gregory (Chris Haywood) is a pervasive presence: his work on the infrastructure of the town, including the church,

suggests his centrality to the morality and perspective of the community. Moreover, he is never brought to justice: only the viewer recognises him for what he is, and experiences the menace in his aborted restaging of the first murder in his encounter on the road with Claire. However, in essence it is the ubiquity of the murderer which gives the clue to the film's metaphoric force, as it confronts the audience with this knowledge, and the discomfited acknowledgement of the unsuspected guilt beneath the public persona. In Lawrence's film, the murder is a maguffin, a red herring, but also at the same time an analogy, an allegorical equivalence, a crucial catalyst and a rhetorical parallel to its narrative of a community of relationships in undeclared crisis. The film's capitalisation on this duality in its nature, and its commentary on the duplicity apparently inherent in human interaction, is borne out in Jindabyne's advertising tagline: 'under the surface of every life lies a mystery.'

Although the film concentrates principally on Claire and her reaction to her husband's and the town's ambivalent response to the discovery of the woman's body, it is the male group which provokes concerted scrutiny (both by the fictional community and the viewer) and yet frustrates interpretation. The group is defensive and inarticulate in the face of the town's censure and disbelief, with guilt and shame either covered or supplanted by self-protection and self-justification. The members of the group reflect a cross-section of generations, marital status and immigrant origins, but the similarity in their reactions to the discovery of the dead woman's body suggests a uniformity in gender which supersedes such differences. This essentially white group's response to their communal boundary situation highlights their difference in terms of conscience - as derived from what the film implies are innate gender- and ethnicity-based characteristics - from their peers.

Jindabyne's scrutiny of the group within the texture of the town, and the probing of the marriages and partnerships within the group, is based in the same

techniques which Lawrence used in *Lantana*: shooting with only natural light, using real locations and homes in place of studio sets, and working habitually with only one take per scene with his cast. This visual approach generates a verisimilitude in the representation of the lived environment. Simultaneously, Lawrence's method for recording acting and dialogue interchanges creates a spontaneous, authentic continuum of performance and a consistency in the depiction of human interactions which is central to his films' aura of observational realism (Carruthers 2008). Coincidentally, these techniques also clearly bear comparison with those of the acknowledged auteur directors within contemporary British social realist cinema, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, for whom Lawrence has expressed admiration:

With most big films we are used to some sort of veneer as far as light goes. To me, filters get in the way of truth. And in terms of getting truth from actors too. For me, the colour temperature works. If it's a little green when the kitchen light goes on, (because it's domestic lighting,) that's OK, we get used to it. If I could get rid of the camera, I would.  
(Carruthers 2008)

Lawrence and the screenwriter (playwright Beatrix Christian) adapted Carver's story to its Australian setting through several crucial, focused alterations and additions. The unidentified female body in Carver's story becomes a specifically Aboriginal female victim in the film, thus rhyming together female and Aboriginal persecution. The white killer's attack on the girl is also connected forcibly to the white male group's apparent indifference to her body, as they delay their return to the town and their alerting of the police in order to complete their fishing trip. There are both unpleasant and ambiguous associations in the way that the landscape appears sullied by the abject presence of the woman's body, not least because the fishing trip is



presented as a male preserve and privilege which requires and deserves distance and freedom from female and familial associations: 'So much water so close to home, why did he have to go miles away to fish?' (Carver 1993: 76). However, at the same time the men exhibit a curious mixture of fascination with and insensitivity towards the corpse in 'their' river. Leah Purcell's character makes this apparently ethnically-based response more culpable by recalling the local indigenous spiritual belief that souls of the dead must cross the mountains where the river runs in order to find peace - and that because of their conduct the men are as guilty as the girl's killer in disregarding and impeding her soul's journey.

Claire's awkward attempts to atone to the Aboriginal community for the men's and town's offence are eventually accepted by the Aboriginal women, while Stewart's belated apology to the murdered girl's father is rebuffed contemptuously. Through Claire's efforts to exculpate the men's negligence by reaching out to the bereaved Aboriginal community, the film emphasises the similarity of the women's positioning from a male viewpoint, irrespective of their ethnic origin. Maleness, and particularly a group mentality, are the problem, and this is also stressed via the pervasive presence in the town of the murderer Gregory. That the killer is visible, recognisable (to the audience) and yet remains unpunished suggests Jindabyne's similarity to *Lantana*'s modus operandi as an oblique and short-circuited thriller. The film's concentration on and gradual revelation of pervasive ethnic and gender-based prejudices, and its deliberate excavation of the repressed and unarticulated within the everyday, must also be seen alongside one of the most celebrated examples of Lawrence's advertising projects. In view of the subject matter and dedication to social realism displayed in his second and third films, it is noteworthy that Lawrence directed an advert about domestic abuse for the Sydney Film Company for White Ribbon Day (UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) in 2004:

The caption on the print ads appears as editorial on a home fashion spread, artfully photographed in muted lighting. Juxtaposed against tranquil images is the copy that amongst the interior design speak mentions shocking incidences of domestic violence. In one showing an entrance hall the copy reads, ‘The floating oak staircase creates a spacious feel. Roger's pregnant wife broke her arm, fractured her skull and miscarried after he threw her down them. The staircase accentuates the height of the living and entertaining area.’ In another showing a kitchen the copy reads, ‘The gallery-style kitchen gleams in stainless steel. Keith dragged his girlfriend by her hair across the original polished floorboards. His favourite place to belittle her in front of guests is on the two metre Meubles dining table.’ In the TV ad, directed by award-winning director Ray Lawrence, a man takes a real estate agent on a tour of his home and coolly but menacingly throws in comments about his wife that reveal another side to the picture. Saatchi & Saatchi creative director David Nobay said the campaign aimed to confront the complacency surrounding domestic violence in powerful way by portraying a disturbing world in which violence has been ‘normalized.’<sup>4</sup>

Although the director’s cinematic and advertising careers appear separate, and even antithetical within an auteurist and art film-based reading of his output, the poignancy of this example alongside the familial and social portraiture seen in *Lantana* and *Jindabyne* reveals the thematic consistency, social realist responsibility and ironic, Gothic inflection of Lawrence’s work.

The key Gothic and Australian addition to Carver is the setting of Jindabyne

itself: a town that is really two towns, the original submerged beneath a lake after the building of a dam, and the second, newer version built on nearby hills. The parallel towns offer a concise metaphor for the parallel but distinct existences and perspectives of the communities and sub-communities, internally divided more than just differentiated by gender and ethnicity. The sunken town is also the most potent metaphor for the unacknowledged truths about the town's past and its values. (Coincidentally, it also alludes to Bliss and 'the Vision Splendid' - the flooded town redeemed by the spiritual action of a woman). After the sequence showing Gregory's stalking of his victim, scenes in the town begin with enigmatic references to latent anxiety surrounding another woman's body: Claire's fear of a second pregnancy, on the basis of the (at this point) indeterminate problems which ensued from her first. While Claire questions Stewart repeatedly on his return, in an attempt to understand his reaction to the body, in many ways the men's response to the murdered girl remains unarticulated and inexplicable. It cannot be explained by them, but the answer lies in the town or towns themselves, under a different blanket of water.

The additional significance of the town within the narrative underlines the film's similarity to the Gothic, despite or even because of its apparent art cinema credentials. There is a discernible Gothic hangover in *Jindabyne*, in the dialogue which refers to the 'ghosts' who must dwell in the sunken town, the dead but unburied elements of the past which continue to influence the everyday, and the children of the families involved who, though remaining on the periphery of the narrative, indulge in morbid, eerie activities as they try to rationalise and express their own responses to grief and trauma. The town becomes the indicative Gothic motif for the buried, the repressed and the irruptive within the close-knit rural community. Beatrix Christian recognised this transformation of the short story into a ghost story in the process of the Australian adaptation:

Everybody in the story is haunted by something, whether it's somebody who's died, or whether it's a past they'd like to change, or whether it's the person they thought they might have been but never became [...] The girl's body being found in the river is a beautiful but terrible image of something rising to the surface emotionally for the men.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from this thematic and metaphorical link to the Gothic, there are more obvious and powerful connections to the iconography of earlier Gothic cinema. These are present in the film's treatment of the landscape: the rocky outcrop, perhaps with Aboriginal spiritual significance, where the white killer waits in his car for his victim; the swallowing forest where the men first encounter the body; and above all the country road, where female drivers are threatened or attacked. In the opening sequence, the barbed wire which is visible around the outcrop evokes the treatment of an Aboriginal landscape tainted by externally imposed control and ownership seen in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978) and *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Philip Noyce, 2003). The bush and the forest embody a threat directed at male and female characters alike in Gothic examples such as *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and *Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1979). The road has been a recurrent Gothic setting, from *The Cars That Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974) and *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1987) to *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005). Through these representations and connotations of the landscape, *Jindabyne* is both adapted and Australianised.

### **Conclusion: Commercial Director, Adaptable Auteur**

While adaptation remains a conservative cinematic staple, the adaptations undertaken in Lawrence's films are representative of the complex motivations driving and

defining film production in national film, art cinema contexts. Lawrence's features not only adapt literature but also adapt generically-derived expectation (itself a characteristic Gothic approach) in their treatment of evocative, allusive and enigmatic (indicative Gothic) materials. In attempting to position Lawrence's films, the comparisons drawn by reviewers between disparate texts (for example, likening *Jindabyne* to *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), *Wolf Creek* and *The Trouble With Harry* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1955): (Bradshaw 2007; French 2007)) simply highlight their variegated texture and appeal. Describing his own film, Lawrence claimed that he 'wasn't interested in making a thriller - maybe we've invented a new genre' (Urban 2008).

While they embody some of the techniques and effects of adaptation from literature, Lawrence's films also epitomise the adaptation of Australian film itself to new circumstances of filmmaking, funding and marketing. Lawrence's widely-spaced films are illustrative of fundamental changes in film finance, which have taken place over the lifetime of the Australian revival. The production of *Bliss*, supported by the New South Wales Film Corporation, represents the early model of state film funding intended to support feature production. Perhaps as an adaptation of a best-selling novel, *Bliss* represented a reduced risk, and the film became a substantial critical success. *Lantana*, by contrast, was supported by the Film Finance Corporation, the more business-savvy and commercially-driven incarnation of state film finance which was initiated in the late 1980s. It was also produced by Jan Chapman Productions, the company behind other auteur and art cinema successes like *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) and *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (Gillian Armstrong, 1992). (Armstrong directed the film adaptation of another Peter Carey novel, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997)). The potential, lucrative commercial cross-over of art cinema directors' work is borne out by these examples, but even more so by the

critical and commercial recognition of Lawrence's second feature.

Jindabyne was funded by the April Babcock and Brown Movie Venture, which was founded in 2003. April films was one of first two FLICS (Film Licensed Investment Companies) created under the Australian government's film funding initiative. It subsequently merged with the Macquarie Film Corporation. Its subsequent partner Babcock & Brown is an international investment fund and asset management group, which acts as a private equity financier for feature film production in Australia. This film finance initiative epitomises the type of capital support and speculation gaining ground in the Australian film industry in the new millennium. The film represented part of an understanding between the FFC and April Babcock and Brown Movie Venture for production of 8-12 films over a four-year period. The second film on the venture's slate - a teen car genre picture entitled *Bikini Racer* - seems never to have entered production, and later updates to the April Entertainment production schedule instead mention a forthcoming adaptation of *March* based on the 2006.

Pulitzer Prize winner by Geraldine Brooks.<sup>5</sup>

There is a certain irony evident in these shifts in the funding of Lawrence's films, which perhaps reflect and parallel the pragmatic decisions in casting, aesthetic crafting and generic duality noted above, which facilitate and underpin the films' critical and commercial accomplishments. Adaptation and art film are, within the Australian cinema as within any other production context, commercial choices as much as market niches. Lawrence's initial national and art film successes (supported in the case of *Bliss* by the state film board system, and in the case of *Lantana* by the harder business line of the FFC), have attracted support for his most recent film from an investment bank, which simply but shrewdly recognises a strong property with potential for profit for its investors on its outlay. The superficially non-commercial

art cinema project of Jindabyne receives its finance from the most profit-based investment institution, probably on the basis of the cultural caché of Lawrence's previous awards for Bliss and Lantana, but perhaps because the investment bankers are more familiar with his adverts. Perhaps this is why, even when concentrating on the small oeuvre of feature films, we should not forget Lawrence's day job - as a director of commercials - and consequently we should appreciate that even in the art film and national cinema context in which he has received recognition, he remains first and foremost a highly commercial director.

#### NOTES

1) Priscilla was trailed and launched at Cannes and premiered in America before its opening in Australia. See Al Clark, *The Lavender Bus: how a hit movie was made and sold*, (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999), pp.37-56, 131-149, 162-175.

2) Press notes for Lantana, Winchester Film Distribution UK 2002.

3) Press notes for Jindabyne, Mongrel Media Distribution Canada 2006.  
[http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press/Jindabyne/press\\_kit.pdf](http://www.mongrelmedia.com/press/Jindabyne/press_kit.pdf) (Accessed 03/03/2008)

4) <http://www.bandt.com.au/news/a6/0c0296a6.asp> (Accessed 05/03/2008)

5) April Films company profile:

<http://www.april.com.au/about.php> (Accessed 12/02/08)

Variety posting re: April films and Bikini Racers:

<http://www.april.com.au/pdfs/Jindabyne%20Variety%2021:07:04.pdf>  
(Accessed 05/03/2008)

#### REFERENCES

Bordwell, D. (1988) *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge.

Bradshaw, P. (2007) Jindabyne review, Guardian Unlimited  
<http://artsguardian.co.uk/print/0,,329907299-117421,00.html>  
(Accessed 25/05/07)

Carruthers, A. 'Q and A with Ray Lawrence'  
<http://www.infilm.com.au/features/raylawrence.htm> (Accessed 18/04/2008)

Carver, R. (1993) Short Cuts, London: Harvill Press.

Dermody, S. and Jacka, E. eds. (1988), The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the late '80s, North Ryde: AFTRS.

French, P. (2007) 'When fishermen catch a corpse...' Guardian Unlimited  
<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329930133-102280,00.html>  
(Accessed 27/05/2007)

Grady, P. 'Ray Lawrence's Bliss: Interview with Pam Grady'.  
<http://www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/lawrence> (Accessed 28/01/2008).

Rayner, J. (2000) Contemporary Australian Cinema, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Thomas D., and Gillard G., 'Threads of Resemblance in New Australian Gothic Cinema', Metro n.136 (2003), 36-44.



Urban, A.L., (2008), 'Lawrence, Ray - Jindabyne' Urban Cinefile  
<http://urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=12061&s=Interviews>  
(Accessed 18/04/08)