

TRACKING THE TRACKER

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One of the highlights of the year 2002 in films was the success of Rolf de Heer's THE TRACKER. De Heer wrote his own screenplay and the rewards have been considerable, financial as well as in terms of prestige: THE TRACKER gathered a heap of AFI awards (including best screen play).. There is cause for disquiet, however. The novelist and short story writer B. Wongar argues that THE TRACKER derives, in essence if not in minute detail, from his own story of the same name, which was originally published in 1977 in the French literary magazine (edited by Jean-Paul Satre and Simone de Beauvoir) Les Temps Modemes.

Attribution can be a tricky business, especially in the translation from novel, or story, to the screen. Australian cinema seems to have had its own share of appropriations and conjuring tricks, all of which have been to the benefit of film makers and scriptwriters and to the heartache of authors.

I remember back in the 1960s when the young Brisbane writer Rhyll McMaster was delighted to have her first short story, THE PLUMBER, published in Southerly. She was not so delighted, though, when Frank Moorhouse commented to her that the then unknown film maker Peter Weir had made a film, also titled THE PLUMBER, which bore suspicious resemblances to her story. Rhyll, at that stage, had no financial

resources to attempt any legal action. Without a solicitor to back up your claim, words mean nothing. Rhyll, I remember, felt hurt and exploited.

A few years later Rhyll McMaster's then husband, the novelist Roger McDonald, was approached by Peter Weir about making a movie based on the Gallipoli campaign. "1915 was still in MS in 1978," says McDonald., "I wrote asking Weir if he'd like to look at a copy (with an eye to an adaptation implied). Weir said he would, and kept the MS for 6 months. When I wrote asking for it back he thanked me and said he was researching everything he could on the subject. I was a bit miffed regarding an unpublished novel as not exactly research, and when Gallipoli the movie came out a National Times reporter wrote a story drawing attention to similarities." When 1915 was published (well before GALLIPOLI was released) it won the Miles Franklin Award, and many people, who had read the novel, were to see the similarities between it and GALLIPOLI.. The story of two young men ending up on that battlefield has uncanny resemblances to 1915, which was, itself, eventually filmed as a TV series. Breach of copyright? Nah! The film people all say. 'There is no copyright in ideas". No copyright, it seems, also in those things like basic storylines and characterisation that an author usually regards as part and parcel of their creative field.

THE TRACKER is another case in point. When Wongar's story first appeared, it attracted international attention. His book of stories, THE TRACK TO BRAGLU ended with that piece. Simone de Beauvoir wrote: 'The white man has strangled the country by stealing the magic that made rain. That is the image of the tribal country I encountered earlier in The Track to Braglu and Barbaru (both first published in Les Temps Modemes}... lyrical documents of our time, a time monstrously savage.'

When THE TRACK TO BRAGLU was first published, in New York, Thomas Keneally wrote in The New York Times: 'It is said that among the finest poetry composed on the continent of Australia are the ancient incantatory songs of the Aboriginal peoples. Mr Wongar's arresting chants do full honour to that tradition.'

Here, with B. Wongar, an immediate problem arises, and I do not discount its import in the case of Rolf de Heer and THE TRACKER.

B. Wongar was understood to be Aboriginal., by his editors and publishers and by the initial readers and reviewers. When his first book was published in America it was accepted by academics as a pioneering literary work, portraying relations between black and white Australians from an Aboriginal perspective. All the stories in his books were told in a first-person Aboriginal voice, which appeared authentic, and biographical blurbs did nothing to counteract that impression. He is, in fact, a Serb migrant, living in Melbourne. At that time, in Australia, little Aboriginal work had been published. Colin Johnson's WILD CAT FALLING (1969) was acknowledged as the first novel by an Aboriginal writer - and Johnson later changed his name to Mudrooroo, but his ethnicity, also, was to be challenged.

The name 'B. Wongar' did cause something of a stir among people in the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council. "'Wongar' is not an Aboriginal name," I was told. Suspicions began to be aroused, especially as B. Wongar continued to be published, and to win international prizes.

In the early 1980s Robert Drewe, the novelist and at that time a journalist with the Bulletin, tracked the mysterious 'B.Wongar' to a post box in Prahran. The writer's real name, Drewe revealed, was Stretn Bozic. "Stretn Bozic!" I remember the journalist Margaret Jones exclaiming to me, "Stretn Bozic means Merry Christmas in Serbian!" Bozic had fled Yugoslavia under Communism to settle in Australia, where he eventually went opal mining in the Centre, got lost, and was I rescued by a group of tribal Aborigines. He lived with them for quite some time and -was initiated into their tribe. He married an Aboriginal woman. Eventually returning to Melbourne, he found a new persona, and a new language for writing - English, but in the first-person voice of an Aborigine.

Until Rob Drewe's disclosure in the Bulletin B. Wongar's work had been praised. Even in Australia there had been cautious interest, and a little curiosity.

After that, despite receiving various grants from the Literature Board, the shadow of 'cultural appropriation' has hung over B. Wongar's name.

It has not, apparently, prevented Rolf de Heer from writing a screenplay unnervingly i close to the original short story. Wongar/Bozic attempted to communicate with de Heer but was stonewalled. I have copies of correspondence and a Statutory Declaration to confirm this. The author sent me photocopies of his original story, de Heer's film streatment and his correspondence with the Australian Film Corporation and others showing his attempts to gain some form of acknowledgment from de Heer.

Included in the material I received, were papers showing that in 1994 the film maker Petar Leovic was funded by the Australian Film Commission to write a screenplay based on B. Wongar's story, acknowledged as such. The brochure issued by Petar Leovic announces, in 1994, that 'TRACKER, screenplay by Petar Leovic based on the story by B.Wongar" was "Developed with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission." Further funding, however, was not granted so the project was aborted, though no doubt the murky archives of the AFC still contain the material, and one cannot but speculate what resonances the original story may have set vibrating along the gossip trail.

Petar George Leonic's later Statutory Declaration states: "Early in 2001 I read in the Sydney Morning Herald that a film called 'THE TRACKER" was to be made in conjunction with The Adelaide Festival, SBS Independent, The Australian Film Commission and the S.A.Film Commission. I then had a series of e-mail exchanges with the director of the film, the acclaimed RolfDeHeer. He sent me a treatment of the film script after which I warned him that his story was very similar to B. Wongar's story of the same title. He seemed unconcerned and did not contact B. Wongar to see if there was any copyright breach. My suggestion that all three of us should collaborate on his screenplay fell on deaf ears and we never heard from him or the producers again."

Rold de Heer is credited with the original screenplay of his film THE TRACKER. The central question remains: how much of the original concept and intention survives translation into another medium? What resemblance

is there between de Heer's script and the original story? At what point is an original original? Or is an adaptation original? Who possesses the moral rights as well as the legal rights? It is a problem that exists, also, with any translations. The American poet Robert Lowell called his volume of 'translations' IMITATIONS, and no doubt he retained the copyright in his own versions. On the other hand, Moral Rights legislation enshrines the right of the original creator to be acknowledged, if not paid.

Intrigued by the issues, I set the puzzle to my postgraduate creative writing students at Adelaide University. What sort of modifications would be essential in translating a story into the medium of cinema? At that stage they had not seen the film, but I began by reading them the original Wongar story.

In Wongar's story the tracker is the narrator. That is crucial. The setting is the Flinders ranges in the 1920s The tracker has been employed to trace another Aboriginal man, another key motif in both story and film.. More importantly, there are three white men ('the Sergeant, the stockman and that fella in the dark glasses') in the party. We read the story from the tracker's perspective and he leads the others slowly into dangerous perils of dehydration and internal fighting; the tracker himself is seeking reconciliation with his own ancestral spirits. There is only one pivotal event: the three white men fall to fighting among themselves for the illusory gold they imagine they have discovered. This element — the gold - is not developed in the film, but the conflict between the three whites certainly is.

The story, as originally published, is lyrical rather than dramatic. It is concerned with atmosphere and the evocation of an Aboriginal relationship with environment and ancestral spirits. The narrative element is minimal; in fact it is the weakest part of the work.

In de Heer's film, the setting is the Flinders ranges in the 1920s. The tracker has been employed to trace another Aboriginal man and the alienating atmosphere of the country, to the white party, is emphasised. They bicker among themselves and the tracker becomes the never acknowledged but undisputed leader, remaining enigmatic and imbued with spiritual qualities and knowledge of the land, in a way that is congruent with the essential tenor of Wongar's story. The theme of Aboriginal association with the land has become recognised as the whole basis of their culture, but this has not always been so and it is interesting that, during the 1980s, B. Wongar used this story in writing workshops at the Aboriginal Research Centre, Monash University, run by Dr Eve Fesl, to prepare young Aboriginal students, brought from all over Australia, to inspire them to do their own writing, and to recognize and articulate their inheritance.

When my students discussed the original version, the first consideration raised was that the story is told from the Aboriginal viewpoint; in film, by its very nature, it is difficult to provide that subjective dimension. The characters, only sketched originally, would need to be fleshed out, given some dimension and some specific personality interest and contrast. Wongar's concept of three whites in the party, though, was seen as one of the mainstays of development or adaptation. De Heer, in also using the three white men, remains true to Wongar's original story in a crucial architectural

element. What then, I asked my students, would be the requirements, in cinema, in developing the key plot element of the person being tracked?

Almost immediately, several students suggested that for a film, the original offence, never really clarified in the story, would have to be sufficiently arresting to justify the search and the tension that this would generate. "Have him rape a white woman," one suggested immediately. "That would be very contemporary, it would hit a nerve." "Make him a killer," another proposed, but suggested the nature of the 'crime' be ambiguous, allowing the audience to speculate upon the provocation that might have preceded that initiating incident.

In a film, I suggested, there must be more specific action and tension to sustain the long search sequences. "In a hunt and chase movie," one of them suggested, "there should be red herrings, false alarms, something to keep the white men edgy and apprehensive." The solution seemed obvious: Let there be tribal Aborigines just out of sight. Spears and weapons.

Once the idea of tribal Aborigines was introduced, it became a possible means for providing what was next discussed: the climax points on the narrative, and their placement. A key point should be one third of the way through; and then around two-thirds there must be some action, some event to turn the tension screws tighter.

I then read them the de Heer film script.

The only real aspect my students had not already mapped out in the movement of

Wongar's story into the dimension of de Heer's screen treatment was the rather gross bit of overt Christian symbolism near the end. They all cackled at that, when the script instructed that the tracker quote Latin incantations from the Mass. My students approved the film development of the three whites, and the incorporation of dramatic encounters, torture and brutality. That is what filmgoers want, they agreed.

The lyrical quality of the original story was what they most talked about. Visual images would have to help convey that quality. Photography and image, in cinema, would play a crucial part in establishing and developing atmosphere. At this point I mentioned one of the stunning successes of the film: the transformation of photographic images of the country into painted images, rather in the style of the Namatjira school. The magic of cinema can do things no story approaches.

In the discussion that followed I outlined the history of B. Wongar into Stretz Bozic and the ensuing controversy. A couple of my students suggested that B. Wongar may have been refused any acknowledgment or attribution because his name, unfortunately, had become associated with false dealing and misrepresentation. Everyone remembered the more recent Helen Demidenko/Darvill controversy, and the danger these days, of cultural appropriation, even if well- or naively-intentioned..

There was no doubt in the students' minds that the B.Wongar story was the real genesis of the Rolf de Heer film. But I had to point out to them that, technically, there was nothing that could be legally defined as plagiarism: the Wongar story has no dialogue that could be 'lifted', it has no detailed characterisations that could be unambiguously pinpointed, it has no firm narrative to be appropriated. What it has is a situation that is developed emotionally and an environment that is quite vivid and even time specific. Rolf de Heer's film has virtually the same cast of characters, similar landscape and historical backgrounds, and a leading figure, the Tracker, who comes to dominate the spiritual environment of the movie. The events of the film are original, in that sense, though they conform to the narrative demands of cinema. Having read the original story, my students were confident that the film would never have been conceived, or developed, if the Wongar original had not been there.

Are authors entitled to no redress? 'There is no copyright in ideas' the Law would have it. But, even with the introduction of Moral Rights legislation, there is a terrible sense of something wrong here. It is the act (ironically, given the context) of creative appropriation.

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