**Terror Nullius by Soda_Jerk**

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While fluidity of identity, plurality [sic] and multiplicity are always claimed … partly to cover up …. invariably wealthy, privileged or bourgeois-assimilationist background – the enemy is always to be essentialized … there has to be a strong distinction between Good and Evil.

Mark Fisher, 2013

In 2018, the Australian artist collective Soda_Jerk, comprising of Sydney-born siblings Dominique and Dan Angeloro, released a sample-based video work that montages and reimagines iconic scenes from Australian cinema and broadcast media history. In this reimagined, stylistically irreverent collation – entitled *Terror Nullius* – Skippy the bush kangaroo is well-versed in postcolonial theory, John Jarrett from *Wolf Creek* (2013) is responsible for the disappearance of the schoolgirls of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and in multiple scenes, the bigoted behaviour of notorious characters from both cinema history and Australian public life are punished by unlikely heroes. On the night before its premiere at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, the Ian Potter Foundation – who funded the $100,000 project – released a statement announcing the removal of their public support of the work. The trust claimed the video was ‘very controversial’, a comment that the creators publicly addressed: ‘If “very controversial” is another way of saying that the work is willing to start uncomfortable conversations, then we’ll happily wear it.’ The controversy predictably helped seal the work’s success, the public narrative complementing the video work’s focus on the marginal, oppressed figure fighting against all odds to come out on top.

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www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/mark-fisher/exiting-vampire-castle

The video work has received resounding praise, with commentators perceiving it as a timely and admirable revolt against the ‘antiquated myths white Australians can’t seem to leave behind’, in the words of reviewer Joseph Earp.\(^3\) It has subsequently been exhibited at Sydney’s Artspace (18 January 2019–28 April 2019), and has been screened in galleries and cinemas throughout Australia and abroad – most recently at the Women Make Waves Film Festival in Taiwan (5–9 October 2019).\(^4\) Despite the overwhelmingly positive reception and the praise of its political dimension, there remains little critical consideration of *Terror Nullius’s* content and message, or its broader implications as a critique of Australian film and politics. This review will alleviate this troubling oversight by considering the fallacy of the video work’s foundational claim: that Australian film, television and culture is devoid of diverse representation and is guilty of relentlessly upholding repressive ideologies and belief systems. This is not to suggest that Australian film and television has maintained a commendable diversity quota or is laden with progressive narratives – it hasn’t and isn’t. However, there are many resounding examples of celebrated and commercially successful Australian films (many of which are sampled in *Terror Nullius*) that are testament to the robust nature of Australian cinema and its vibrant political undercurrents. Moreover, the video’s particular style of satire and political critique serves as a telling representation of current tendencies in political commentary.

Act One of *Terror Nullius* begins by evoking raw nostalgia (most present in those of similar ages to the millennial artists) through sampling the now iconic hook used to introduce the long-running Australian televised music programme *Rage*: a woman shouting ‘rage’ over a sample of Iggy Pop’s *Real Wild Child* (1986).\(^5\) The hook plays over the flashing title ‘TERROR NULLIUS’. The evocation of this youth-orientated monument of Australian culture is alluring and conjures the sense of anticipation of the original programme. From here, a sample is taken from the television series *Please Like Me* (2013–2016), where Josh Thomas’s character laments the treatment of Aboriginal Australians and the racism they still suffer. However, he is removed from *Please Like Me’s* suburban setting and placed amongst the cast of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), where Terence Stamp’s character, transgender woman Bernadette, responds, ‘Jesus, what are we gonna do?’ Adam/Felicity (Guy Pearce) retorts, referring to his plan to repaint their graffitied bus, ‘We’re going to start off with a little facelift’.

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\(^3\) Joseph Earp, ‘Terror Nullius is a visual anthem for our racist, decaying nation’, *The Brag*, 21 May 2018
https://thebrag.com/terror-nullius-sydney-film-festival/

\(^4\) Prominent examples include: Festival of (In)appropriation, Egyptian Theatre, Los Angeles, California, USA (18 November 2018); Lost River Festival, San Marcos, USA (1 November 2018); Unorthodocs (documentary film festival), Wexler Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, USA (28 October 2018); Marseille Underground Film and Music Festival, Marseille, France (24 October 2018). Solo exhibitions include: City Gallery Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand (11 August 2018 – 18 November 2018); Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, Wagga Wagga, Australia (24 November 2018 – 1 February 2019); for updates, consult Soda_Jerk’s website ‘News’: www.sodajerk.com.au/news.php?n=1

\(^5\) Reputed for its regular special guests (who curate the music videos played during the programme), alternative edge, and support of local and young artists alongside a top fifty countdown, *Rage* (1987–) is the longest-running televised music programme still being produced in 2019. It typically airs on Friday nights, running through to Saturday mornings and Sunday mornings on ABC, Australia’s national public television network. For more, see ABC, ‘Rage’ URL:
https://www.abc.net.au/rage/.
The intent of the video work is thus indicated. The bigoted history of Australia, as it lingers in cinema, television and public life, will be given a ‘facelift’. Old material will be renewed.

The method for reimagining this footage follows a repetitive formula introduced in the following scene. An audio recording of Mel Gibson’s notorious 2010 phone call in which he abuses his then girlfriend Oksana Grigorieva is played to the dismayed cast of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Upon listening, the cast band together, with the support of a host of iconic characters – including Sandy from *Grease* (1978), the two murderous schoolgirls from *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) and Lucy from *Wolf Creek* (2016–2017), to name a few – to punish his irredeemably sexist behaviour. Mel Gibson’s character from *Mad Max* (1979) is attacked in an orgiastic, slapstick bloodbath that samples scenes from the climax of the original film. The violence is comical, the jump cuts collating well-known female characters from mismatched eras, genres and realities disorientating. As his car goes up in flames, Kath Day-Knight (Jane Turner) from *Kath and Kim* (2002–2007) smiles on, and Sue Knight (Brenna Harding) from *Puberty Blues* (2012–2014) beams.

![Film still from *Terror Nullius*, photo courtesy of the artists](image)

Act Two follows a similar formula. The drunken, gun-toting gang from *Wake in Fright* (1971) are attacked on a late-night roo-shooting expedition by mutant kangaroos while Sue Charlton (Linda Kozlowski) from *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) gleefully cheers them on. Later, in response to a sexist quip taken from the film, Sue shoots Mick Dundee (Paul Hogan). He is then eaten by a crocodile that finishes his meal with a burp. Although the retribution is always severe, the gore is never too confronting or realistic, neutralised by the B-movie style antics and obvious contrivance.

Despite being positioned as a heroic rebellion against the purportedly oppressive Australian mythology, a closer examination of the films *Terror Nullius* samples reveals the potency of progressive politics within Australian cinema history. This emerges even in the more problematic films it quotes from. Although *Crocodile Dundee* is the tale of an oafish, bigoted macho Australian bushman, the failing of the upper-class, New York journalist/love interest
Sue to adapt to the outback seems in harmony with the broader impetus of *Terror Nullius*. Her class position, education and whiteness don’t protect her from the harsh Australian landscape. Furthermore, the film – made to promote Australiana to an international audience – contains an intriguing scene in which a friend of Dundee is introduced. Alone in the bush, Sue is confronted by an Aboriginal man in body paint (David Gulpilil) – the classic trope of the threatening, exoticised black male body. Heroic Dundee appears from behind holding a knife to the man’s neck. Surprisingly, it is revealed to be a joke, undermining the racist trope and the audience expectation. The man, Neville Bell, is Dundee’s friend. He lives in an urban area, although his father is an Aboriginal elder and he maintains an active role in his community.6

In a scene taken from *The Age of Consent* (1969), Cora (Helen Mirren) and a young man (Harold Hopkins) are on a motorboat on the picturesque Great Barrier Reef. After Ted attempts to molest Cora, she knees him in the groin and pushes him out of the boat. She starts the engine and circles back to shore, leaving him shouting abuse at her while he flails in the sea. This is where the original scene ends – with Cora having successfully fought back against and humiliated her aggressor. Even though it might seem that Cora has achieved a small victory against the misogynistic culture of the 1960s, Soda_Jerk’s reimagining predictably injects more violence – and kitschy contrivance – into the scene. A shark attacks the stranded man; clouds of blood and a detached leg sully the calm ocean. Again, sneers and applauds from a medley of characters from Australian television and film accompany everything, like canned laughter. The impact not only erodes the pathos of the original film but it also seems to trivialise the plight and agency of the original characters, who were products and victims of their culture and context.

6 Importantly, this observation on the hybridity of identity – which productively undermines notions of the noble savage and essentialist connections to the land – is not motivated by progressive politics, despite its interesting dissection of cultural assumptions about race and identity. More invested in the humour of subverting expectation, it is one scene in a largely conservative film. Earlier in the film, Dundee is asked about his opinion on Aboriginal land rights. In response, he undermines the seriousness of the issue with pseudo-spiritual hippy rhetoric, claiming that ‘nobody owns the land’.
Bolstering the public narrative and subsequent praise of the film is the underlying claim that Soda_Jerk are controversially lampooning conservative Australian culture and media – that they are giving problematic visual history a ‘facelift’, as is proposed in the early scene. However, as outlined above, even the films and television programmes they lift from are often progressive. *Mad Max: Fury Road* is part of the (commercially motivated) feminist revival of old film franchises; and in *Age of Consent*, Cora already asserts her agency without the help of a ravenous shark. It might be true that Soda_Jerk are cynically aligning themselves with a pre-existing trend in mainstream culture galvanised by the purportedly anti-nationalist agenda, but it is the particular way that they approach the original material and the reductive view of social justice that is most intriguing, and telling.

This is best explained with reference to the current online culture wars. Leftist cultural theorists such as Angela Nagle and Mark Fisher have extensively discussed the online culture wars and the ubiquity of ‘call-out culture’: the term describing the act of publicly (usually harshly) condemning those guilty of perceived racism, sexism, homophobia or other forms of bigotry. Although, as Fisher acknowledges, those participating in the condemnation are motivated by progressive political purpose, he likens the method of critique in call-out culture to schoolyard bullying. As Fisher explained in 2013 of a then recent manifestation: ‘The open savagery of these exchanges was accompanied by something more pervasive, and for that reason perhaps more debilitating: an atmosphere of snarky resentment.’ More recently, Nagle has emphasised the online left’s hierarchical structure as one constituted by the elevation of its members through self-righteous public displays of ally-ship with marginal groups, self-flagellation for membership in any group perceived as privileged (heterosexual, white or male), and – most sinister – the callous purging of those who do not adhere to their political outlook (one that is prone to rapid development via online internet subcultures, as has occurred recently in regard to trans and non-binary gender politics). Such exchanges are now rife in mainstream media, but are often manifested in online attacks through viral retweets or shares that ruthlessly condemn the wrong-doer. Often, those who participate in the widespread retribution are completely detached from the original debate, but they aid in making the wrongdoer’s condemnation as publicly visible and damning as possible. This pile-on effect is reflected in *Mad Max’s* retribution in *Terror Nullius*. Characters from unrelated eras, genres and realities all unite to vilify the miscreant, despite their complete irrelevance to the original event and context. The guilty party may indeed be bigoted and ignorant, but by publicly shaming the individual those who participate in their humiliation propagate the classic dramaturgy of good versus evil, and, through their self-righteous condemnation, ensure their own status within the symbolic economy. What *Terror Nullius* provides audiences is the most unrefined, transparent version of this, reducing it to its bare mechanisms.

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8 See Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right*, Zero Books, Winchester, 2017
It is not just actors and fictional characters that are punished in Soda_Jerk’s revenge narrative. In Act Two, both the founder of the conservative One-Nation party, Pauline Hanson, and the former Prime Minister, Tony Abbot, are knocked out by boomerangs – an ironic demise, given the boomerang’s origin in Aboriginal culture and the racist conservatism of both these political figures. It appears that Soda_Jerk have consulted a checklist of current political debates to address, and marginalised groups to signal support for, but it is significant to note that they barely address class. This acknowledgement would disturb the reductive binaries established throughout the video that manifest above between the ‘bad white conservative’ and the marginalised, non-white figure/culture. The overt racism of figures like Hanson cannot be underestimated, especially in a post-Trump era in which global neo-fascism is on the rise, but the productivity of painting such figures and their supporters as merely racist, hateful fools to be mocked and shamed is questionable.

In his 1998 book *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Lebanese-Australian theorist Ghassan Hage argues that there are two fantasies of white supremacy upheld in Australian culture: one by the right, and one by the left. Hage contends that both are largely sustained by white people worried about the state of the nation.9 While the right view immigration and Aboriginal rights as a threat (which Hage largely attributes to misdirected economic and social disenfranchisement that the left spare no consideration for), the left are equally guilty of upholding their own version of an idealised nation. Rather than appreciating the agency of others, the political posturing of the (usually white, usually middle-class) left similarly tends towards constructing ethnically othered and non-white subjects as ‘passive objects to be governed by those who have given themselves the national governmental right to “worry” about the nation’.10 Moreover, in their eagerness to promote diversity, the left’s

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10 Ibid, p 17
worrying disregards any legitimate hardships of white Australians, subsequently denying them a mainstream political language to articulate their experience of adversity and therefore making them susceptible to neo-fascist ideology. In line with Hage’s analysis of the ‘worried’ left, Terror Nullius reduces marginalised figures (women, Aboriginal people, native animals, immigrants and LGBTQIA persons) to props in their vision of a liberated Australia. Simultaneously, the video eschews any nuanced engagement with economic and social factors that impact disenfranchised white Australians.

Rather than simply an omission, the negation of class awareness is essential in upholding the populist politics and reductive narrative Terror Nullius relies upon and promulgates. Benjamin Buchloh has perfectly summarised this condition within the art world, claiming that one of the primary responsibilities of the contemporary artist is the ‘effacement of any reflection on social class … After all, the enduring and comprehensive amnesia of class is a foundational condition for the culture of the neoliberalist petite bourgeoisie.’ As mentioned above, the appreciation of diversity and diverse cultural and social practices often constitutes the circumnavigation of a genuine investment in equality while simultaneously maintaining the neoliberal illusion of it. Moreover, the purported radicalism of their stylistic approach – the irreverence to authority and the kitsch jumbling of icons and genres – also adheres to the twentieth-century adoration of the anti-aesthetic and its attendant investment in pastiche. To quote Buchloh again: ‘the spectacularization of negation and the spectacularization of the anti-aesthetic themselves have by now become integral elements of the arsenal of spectacle itself’. It is therefore unlikely that anything truly controversial has been achieved by Soda_Jerk’s approach, either aesthetically or politically – a reality attested by the widespread support for the work. Desiring an aesthetic experience to contain a political utility – constituting a form of ethical consumption – inevitably promulgates the reduction of politics to problematically simplified narratives. Politics is boring. The intellectual labour of grasping the complexity of inequality and economic disparity, and the emotional labour required to cultivate empathy for those who disagree with us, is not a fun pursuit. It is not entertainment and should not be treated as such.

11 Walter Benn Michaels has also brilliantly addressed this in an American context, analysing the neoliberal focus on anti-discrimination. He summarises the left’s view as follows: ‘if you’re poor because you’re a victim of racism, sexism, homophobia – that’s a problem because it’s an inequality of opportunity’; however, if you are not victim to one of the aforementioned circumstances, then your adversity is nobody’s problem but your own. Walter Benn Michaels in discussion with Ryan Smith, ‘Walter Benn Michaels on how liberals still love diversity and ignore inequality,’ The Chicago Reader, 23 November 2016 www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/walter-benn-michaels-the-trouble-with-diversity-election/Content?oid=24418522


13 Most fervent in Dada, the anti-aesthetic describes the rejection and destruction of beauty through artistic gestures, therefore challenging the traditional veneration of aesthetic refinement within the arts. Rather than merely constituting a radical subversion of traditional art, however, Arthur C Danto asserts that the significance of the historical anti-aesthetic lies in its opening up of art to a multitude of divergent aesthetic modes and subjects; see Arthur C Danto, ‘Kalliphobia in Contemporary Art’, Art Journal, vol 63, no 2, 2004, p 26

14 Buchloh, op cit, p xi
The most touching scene in *Terror Nullius* (owing in no small part to the profundity of the original performance) comes close to the end. A sombre sequence borrowed from the 2001 film *Lantana* shows Anthony LaPaglia’s character overcome with emotion, sobbing in his car after the discovery of a crime-scene. The original sound (a tape of a revelatory therapy session) is replaced by a recording of documentarian John Pilger’s description of Australia’s brutal colonial history. The scene is somewhat redemptive after the unrelenting and trivialising juvenility indulged throughout the video. In a successful juxtaposition of the Australian suburban drama and John Pilger’s sobering speech, the repercussions of the terra nullius myth are revealed. The entire Australian landscape is a crime-scene pockmarked by the atrocities of history: a reality that cannot be neutralised by aesthetic transgressions or the symbolic destruction of icons.

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15 The audio is lifted from Pilger’s *The Secret Country* (1986)