

Rabbit-Proof Fence

(Phillip Noyce, 2002)

Component 2: Global Film - Narrative, Representation and Film Style

Focus Area: Narrative

PART 1: Key Sequence(s) and timings and/or links

Sequence 1 - Neville's inspection

00:20:38 – 00:23:55

Sequence 2 - Hunted 00:35:31 – 00:38:45

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

- In one scene, the three protagonists sit, just off centre, in dirty robes in contrast to the other girls who stand to attention in pure white robes, waiting to be told to begin eating. This highlights the difference between the new arrivals and those girls who have already been conditioned to behave in a manner approved of by the camp (and by white Australian society). The other girls have been 'cleansed' of their ethnic identity in a way the three protagonists haven't yet.
- Sequence 1: Symmetrical ELS of the children gathered ready for inspection. This framing implies 'order' and the imposed 'civilisation' of white culture. Throughout the scene there is a separation between the characters on the left and right-hand side of the frame which suggests an ideological gap between the two groups: the children separate from Neville plus the 'headmaster', or in other shots, Nina (the dorm monitor) and the three protagonists.
- Like much of the film, the camera is positioned at the eye-level of the children. This forces the audience to empathise with their view of things, and makes the adults seem towering and powerful, intimidating even if their tone of voice attempts kindness. As Molly approaches Neville, a steadicam tracking shot is used to directly place the audience in her position.
- Sequence 2: As with Sequence 1, most of the

shots are from a child's eye-level (even those of Moodoo), again encouraging the audience to see the narrative from their perspective.

There is a combination of tightly framed group shots of the girls huddled together (emphasising both their vulnerability and their close bond) and ELS of the river. These panoramic shots show us the scale of the Australian landscape - mixing a feeling of intimidating vastness, but also suggesting places the girls can hide from their pursuers.

Mise-en-Scène

- Sequence 1: The colour schemes is divided between the blue sky and the bright green of the trees (familiar as being Australian) and the unblemished white of the church, huts, matron's uniforms and children's smocks. This symbolises the school/camp's aim to 'cleansed' the indigenous people of their ethnic identity. Neville's black suit and book recall the costume of a priest, and though he has no religious authority, this does reflect his 'missionary zeal' to 'civilize the natives'.
- Sequence 2: The location of the Australian landscape is used by the girls to aid their escape on a number of occasions. This stresses the Aboriginal connection to the land and nature. Though this also used a device to build tension, as Moodoo is able to look at innocuous-seeming twigs and mud, and detect signs of the girls' path. The prop of Gracie's bag is used to try to throw him off their trail.

Editing

- Sequence 1: There is consistent use of shot-reverse-shot to show Molly's viewpoint (and those of other children) and responses to this new life. There is also an eye-line match between Nina and Molly, to show their shared heritage - but when she refers to the fairer children as 'cleverer' the girls are separated by cutting, showing how they are also very different in their beliefs.
- Sequence 2: There is cross-cutting between the girls and Moodoo that is typical of the 'chase movie': as the scene progresses, the

time cuts between the two begins to speed up, communicating that he is getting closer and closer - until finally they are in the same shot.

Sound

- Sequence 1: The song performed by the children is an old 'minstrel' song from the US. Minstrels were white performers who 'blacked up' to mock African-Americans. The fact that this is Neville's favourite song is ironic considering the race issues surrounding it. His words to Molly, though initially reassuring, revolve around "duty, service, responsibility" - which also echo American slavery.
- Sequence 2: There is an atmospheric musical soundtrack of haunting wind instruments that adds tension and threat to this scene. They are also reminiscent of indigenous instruments that emphasises the ethnicity of the protagonists and their pursuer. (The soundtrack was composed by Peter Gabriel who is renowned for promoting non-Western artists and sounds).

PART 3: STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- Representation of indigenous and White Australians - though the major themes and plot of the film revolves around the mistreatment of Aboriginal people by the white government (personified by Neville), the representation of individual people of both ethnicities is more complex. Not all the white characters are evil (e.g. the woman on the farm who helps rather than reports the girls) and the character of Moodoo is established as a main antagonist (though it is questionable how much he actually tries to find the girls and to what extent he is going through the motions to please his bosses). In contrast to what Neville believes, the Aboriginal people are not a doomed or inferior race. The girls, especially Molly, are cunning and resourceful. They (and Moodoo) are also portrayed as having a spiritual connection to the land: they often use the landscape itself to hide their trail. When Molly collapses in the desert, it is the call of her hawk 'totem' and the song of her mother that rouse her and enable her to finish her journey. This shows the importance of Aboriginal identity for the people's survival - the very thing the Australian government was trying to remove.
- Good comparisons of the representation

of Indigenous people would be *Walkabout* (1971) - which is by a British filmmaker who has an 'outsiders' view of Australia - and *Ten Canoes* (2006) which is still by a white director, but which won praise for representing Aboriginal people and culture more accurately. Both films feature David Gulpilil, who plays Moodoo in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Historical

- The film was inspired by a 1997 report *Bringing Them Home* which was the first acknowledgement of the forced relocation of Aboriginal children, thereafter known as the 'Stolen Generation'. This was a major victory for Indigenous groups' campaigns for Australia and the wider world to acknowledge the human rights abuses suffered by Aboriginal peoples for over a hundred years. During the colonisation of Australia, the Europeans used 'social Darwinism' to portray the Indigenous people as 'savages', little more than animals. They saw the land as 'terra nullius', an empty, unclaimed place; ignoring that the Aboriginal people had managed the land for over 60,000 years and had a culture that predated prehistoric Europeans. This colonial viewpoint obviously morally excused the stealing of the land and mistreatment of the Indigenous people.
- The film (and the book by Molly's daughter, Doris Pilkington Garimara) was controversial and was accused of misrepresenting history by conservative critics. They claimed the children were removed because there was evidence of child abuse in their families, and that their pursuers were concerned for their welfare.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS - Specialist Focus - Narrative

- The screenplay is by documentary filmmaker Christine Olsen, who said that she was attempting to reveal the 'hidden history' of the hundreds of testimonies in the *Bringing Them Home* report by focusing on just one story. She also said she was deliberately drawing on traditional fairy-tale narratives where children are stolen from home by an 'evil witch' character, who then pursues them through a harsh landscape when the children escape (see the Russian Baba Yaga tales). The film also follows the traditional 'chase movie' narrative where the protagonist(s) escape from confinement and undergo a series of physical tests and situations

of near-capture (often by a cunning hunter). Films like *The Fugitive* (1993) and *Apocalypto* (2006) are good examples of this genre.

- The film is also reminiscent of a colonial genre known as the 'Lost Child' narrative, where a white child disappears into the wilderness and a 'native' hunter is employed to find them and guide them home. *Walkabout* (1971) is a good example. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* inverts these conventions though and the children are Aboriginal and find their own way home, whilst the hunter is an antagonistic character rather than a saviour.
- The Rabbit-Proof Fence itself is a complex and potent symbol in the narrative - and in real life. It was built to stop rabbits from spreading to richer pastures - the rodents themselves could be seen as symbols of the ecological devastation wrought on the land by colonists. Many see the fence as a European attempt to peg out and control a wild landscape - and one which ultimately failed to prevent the spread of pests. Within the film, the fence's historical symbolism is inverted: its meaning is appropriated by the girls as a route to guide them home and aid them in their escape from white authority.