

GENRE

DOWN UNDER

by Samantha Ward

MAD MAX may have opened the antipodean cinema to the world, but there's more to the Aussies than beer, barbies, and crappy soap operas as we find out...



There is no doubt that Australia has produced masterful pieces of cinema, with directors such as Peter Weir and Baz Luhrmann, who have both made prominent stamps in film history. But what about the other side of the film industry? A place where George Miller started his career. The one that belongs to independent features and filmmakers, where a ludicrous and exciting culture lives. Outside of Hollywood, there was an era of filmmakers who basically had no money but what they lacked in funding they more than made up for with imagination and skills. Yes, it's the B-movie, low-budget, grindhouse style that can divide a room of film lovers like marmite at a toast convention, but there isn't anything like exploitation cinema down under.

During the Australian New Wave movement, between the early '70s and late '80s, Australia was producing low budget horrors, comedies, and action

films. The introduction of the R-rating at the time also encouraged filmmakers to cater to a mature audience. Thus the combination of sexploitation, violent action and schlock-horror made a formula that was cost effective, as well as having farcical titles and covers which sold themselves. There was an international wave of protestors fighting for equality at this time, and this was of course reflected through the films and the way they were marketed. Australian filmmakers need only take advantage of the vast and dusty outback to create scenes with seemingly excellent production value. Where the films lacked in special effects, it made up for it with obscene sex, nudity, brutality and very occasionally, outstanding performances from some of the industry's biggest talent. This was 'Ozploitation' in its heyday, a more recent term coined by highly recommended documentary, *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story*

of Ozploitation, directed by Mark Hartley, an Australian director whose previous works are mostly of the music video variety, now famed for his documentaries that look back at the mad world of wild genre filmmaking. Ozploitation is a momentous period that any major fan of genre films should take note of. And more recently, it seems Australia are making a strong comeback with hard-hitting genre films, so it's about time we all caught up to this craze.

Wake In Fright (1971) is one of the most important Ozploitation films to watch, directed by Ted Kotcheff (*First Blood*). A cultural truth that was a frighteningly realistic portrayal of its time, starring Gary Bond as John, a teacher who wants to work in the big city and Donald Pleasence, as an alcoholic drifter with a PHD. This film was an Australian/American production, with a prominent British cast and a Canadian director, this multiculturalism allowed

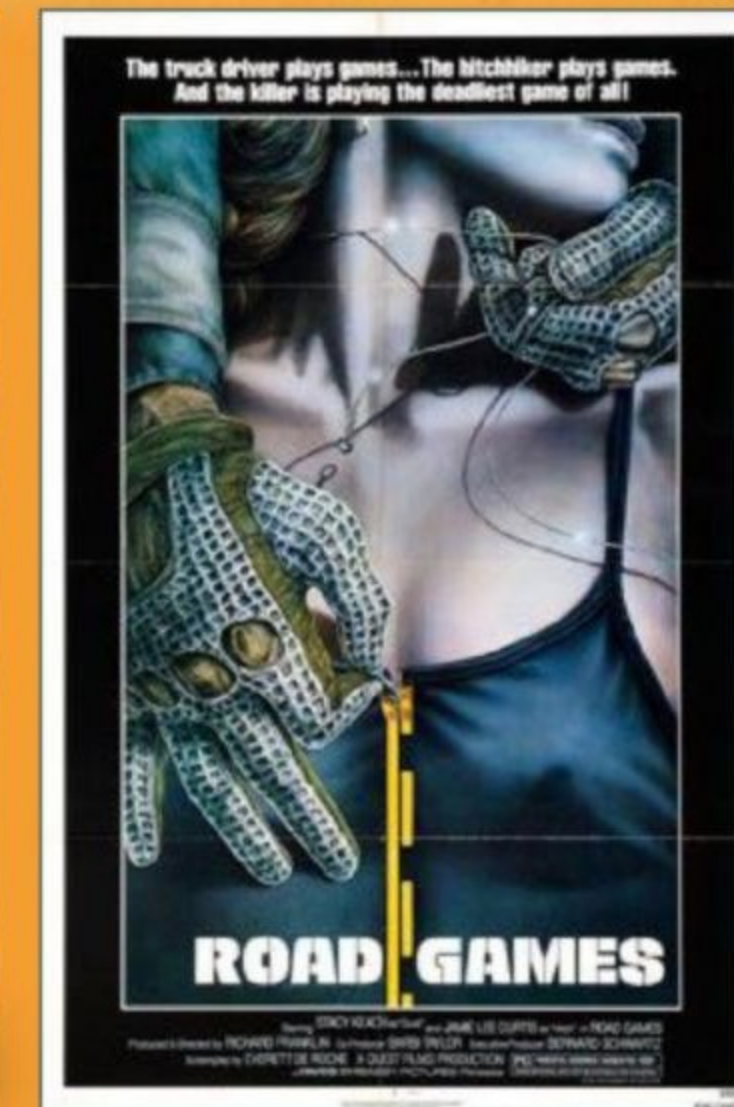
a real in-depth view of the society. It's set in a dried-out town known as The Yabba; a place where any kind of prospect or ambition is repressed, where visitors and citizens alike suffer under the immense peer pressure to do as the rest of the town people do - gamble and drink away your sorrows. It's the gripping downwards spiral of self-destruction that is most disturbing about this film. They were so bold to highlight the urban vulgarity not everyone wanted to accept. Kotcheff managed to show the startling isolation of the Outback with almost every shot. It didn't need a gigantic budget, a simple episodic plot with excellent acting talent is what really pulled this off. This was the beginning of honest and raw action/horror that would soon escalate, inspiring filmmakers to be more experimental and exploitative. Like making a viral video, except this was all the rage for nearly two decades.

It became clear to Australian filmmakers that for a low-budget film to get wider recognition, they must employ US actors. *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976) directed by Philippe Mora does just that by hiring Dennis Hopper. Based on the life of Dan Morgan, an Irish outlaw in Australia. It was exciting to have a renowned and critically acclaimed actor, though Hopper's method acting made the film a little difficult to shoot. Portraying a rum-drinking maniac, Hopper brought all the intensity he could to his role. It was the rawness of Hopper's performance that brought life and magic to the film. Although thought to be unsellable, with disturbing scenes of male rape and violent massacres, Mora proved many wrong when the film was sold at Cannes, and opened in many American theatres, being one of the first Australian films to get that kind of US opening.

Of course there is the *Mad Max* trilogy which was probably one of the most famous set of films to come out of the Ozploitation era and break out internationally. Set in a post-apocalyptic world filled with punks and high powered super cars, it reflected a trend with many low budget filmmakers in the '70s to create dystopian action films. It was a pumped-up action



MAD MAX, 1979



packed feature, sure to begin a theme of future films not just from Australia, but from Hollywood too. Australia brought about more violent road fury films; *Road Games* directed by Richard Franklin and starring Scream Queen Jamie Lee Curtis. Though it has some great car stunts, it was more serial killer horror than road rage. Pulling up alongside *Road Games* is the dystopian world of *Dead End Drive-In* directed by low-budget connoisseur Brian Trenchard-Smith. There are more recent films which most definitely took inspiration from *Mad Max* such as Neil Marshall's *Doomsday* and *Death Race* directed by Paul W.S. Anderson (a remake of the 1975 cult classic). It's crazy to think that George Miller's career took him from the dusty Australian roads to *Happy Feet*; let's hope his return directing *Mad Max: Fury Road* will be the comeback we have longed for.

1984's *Razorback* is another

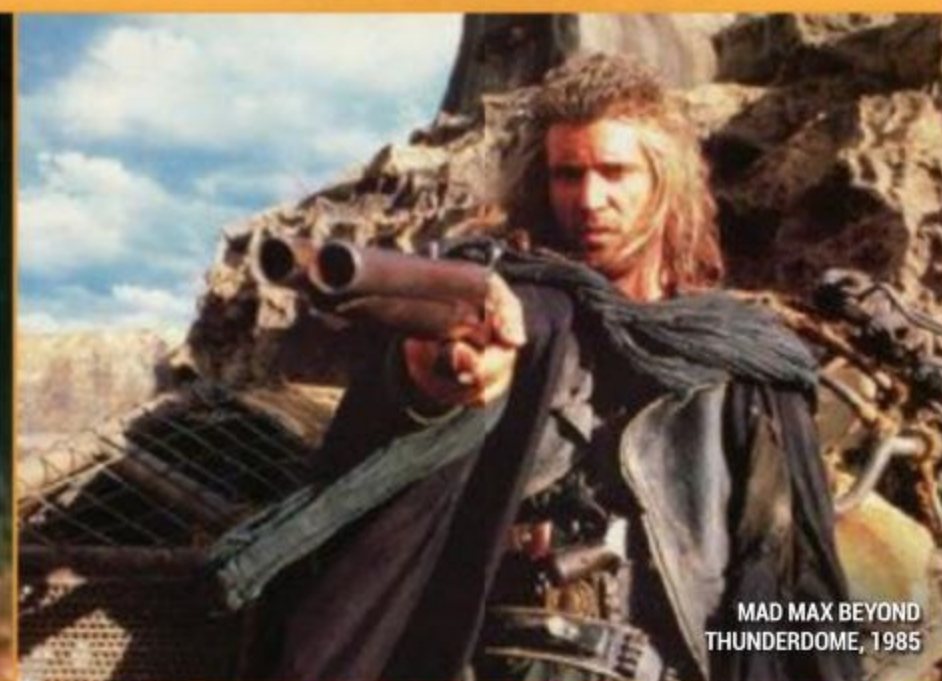
unforgettable Ozploitation gem. Australia's answer to *Jaws*, it definitely has the same suspense and hysteria. Wonderfully shot by director Russell Mulcahy, later known for *Highlander*, it's a classic creature feature; only this one is loose in the dusty, sun-beaten atmosphere of the outback. '*Nine Hundred Pounds of Marauding Tusk and Muscle*', the tagline could not be more self-explanatory. It's fun yet ferocious, with all the brutality and action that makes this an exploitation film. The DVD release even has a special 70-minute feature called '*Jaws on Trotters*'. It was extremely stylistic but didn't get much credit at first as critics thought there was no substance to the film. However the film gained a well-deserved cult following and has far more appreciation now for the production values and style it showed within the budget restraints it was shot under. This was also part of the wave of creature features to show



WAKE IN FRIGHT, 1971



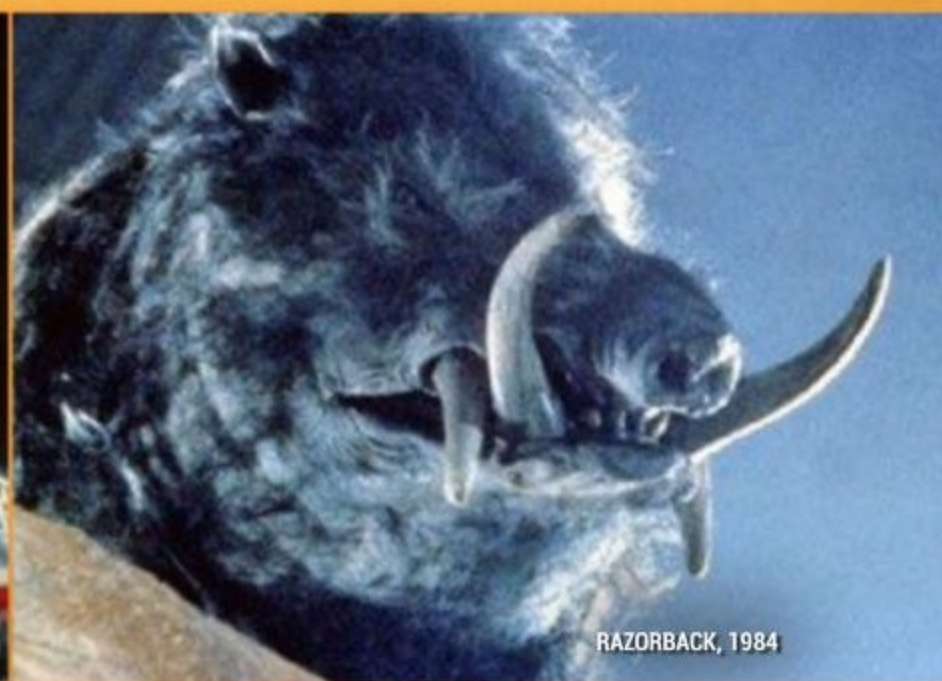
MAD DOG MORGAN, 1976



MAD MAX BEYOND THUNDERDOME, 1985



ROAD GAMES, 1981



RAZORBACK, 1984



TURKEY SHOOT (ESCAPE 2000), 1982



TURKEY SHOOT (ESCAPE 2000), 1982



up in the '80s and '90s which helped the film to get recognised in America. Even recently, B-movie monster flicks have been getting more and more popular, *Razorback* being ever prominent as a classic of this genre.

Not so classic, *Turkey Shoot* (1982, aka *Escape 2000*) was amusingly titled *Blood Camp Thatcher* for the British release. Once again directed by Englishman Brian Trenchard-Smith, a name known for creating low-budget films on a large scale. Smith has said he likes to make films with 'laughs and gasps'. He caters for a thrill-seeking audience. *Turkey Shoot* is perhaps one of his most sadistic films with inhumane scenes of characters being hunted down by fellow humans. It was cheap and nasty with ruthless character; entertainment at its roughest and rawest, you just won't believe what you're seeing most of the time.

Although when it comes to believing what you are seeing, who can believe *Sky Pirates* (1986) actually got made and finished? Directed by Colin Eggleston, inspired by Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of*

the Lost Ark, *Sky Pirates* is a horrendous attempt at creating a sci-fi/action satire. It was just terrible enough to change the reputation of the genre films in Australia and therefore, almost singlehandedly set off the giant rolling boulder that would be the downfall of Ozploitation. Truth be told, most of the films during this time were indeed terrible. For good reason people did not, and would not today, accept the sexism and racism portrayed in them. However, there are a few that do address these issues - although at times extreme, they are honest and provoke change. It is now incredibly rare to have a film so bold, that it is willing to show the negative connotations of its own cultural and political issues. When it comes to independent films, the wild genre was and remains under-appreciated.

The current climate of the Australian film industry isn't quite what it used to be, though we can say that of the industry worldwide. Similar to Hollywood's Superhero syndrome, most Australian films are now just locked into high budget drama/crime genres; it's not the diverse portfolio it once was. The

country has been lacking the infamous wild genre films they thrived on in the '70s and '80s. Say what you will about the quality of Ozploitation films, at least they were getting made. These low-budget films were the reason Australia had a film industry, but once that era seemed to be at an end, the film industry began dwindling with every penny spent. But all hope is not lost, there has been somewhat of a revival of Ozploitation films in the last decade or so.

Wolf Creek (2005) takes us back into the outback with the disturbingly chirpy serial killer Mick Taylor played by John Jarratt. The film was vaguely marketed as being based on true events, though mostly it was just inspired by the real-life murders of tourists by Ivan Milat and Bradley Murdoch. Director Greg McLean created the perfect grindhouse style and atmosphere for this slasher horror. On its initial release it had some dismissal for its raw brutality and treatment of women, whilst others said that it was breaking taboo with a direct depiction of violence and crime. With a mixture of reviews based on the cruelty and, what some called, outrageous bloodshed of the film, it's safe to say that *Wolf Creek* was the beginning of reviving Ozploitation cinema. *Wolf Creek 2* (2013) continues the barbaric killing spree by the vicious Taylor. The title definitely puts a stamp on the horror genre for Australia. It's fair to say that Greg McLean is somewhat of an auteur in the horror genre. McLean also wrote and directed the 2007 monster movie *Rogue*, in which a group of tourists are attacked by a giant vicious crocodile. Adding his own creature feature to the archives, *Rogue* was of course another that took inspiration from *Jaws*, but McLean puts his Aussie version together extremely well. Look out for *6 Miranda Drive*, McLean's next project.

Sean Byrne made a stunning directorial debut with *The Loved Ones* (2009), a noteworthy film with a truly twisted plot. It mixes teen drama and comedy that makes the film easily switch from family fun to deeply disturbing. Robin McLeavy gives an astounding and chilling performance reminiscent of Kathy Bates' character in *Misery*. This is horror



THE LOVED ONES, 2009



THE BABADOOK, 2014

that doesn't just thrive on the amount of violence incorporated but is also brilliantly written with a clever plot twist. It shows a maturity in the horror genre.

Another film with a strong structured plot, and a gasp-worthy twist, is *Red Hill* (2010) directed by Patrick Hughes. Set against the backdrop of small town Australia, this dark and dusty thriller drips with a gritty, western ambience. When a convicted murderer escapes, local police fear his return and with a new officer in town tensions rise and secrets are revealed. A throwback to the spaghetti westerns of the '70s, Hughes manages to achieve a lot with very little.

While not universally known, *Primal* (2010), directed by Josh Reed, is vicious and carnal. As a group of friends explore a cave that has ancient paintings within, they soon realise that it has a connection to a virus that throws away all human rationality when one of them turns into a primal beast whose only interest is feeding; and the only food is their former friends. It's a zombie/virus hybrid set out in the isolating wilderness, with a brilliant energy reminiscent of the '80s horror films.

Broadly speaking, the films of Ozploitation could mostly fit into two genres: horror and road/car action. And while not strictly a director of Australian films anymore, James Wan has made a name for himself in the genre world. With films like *Saw*, *Insidious* and *The Conjuring* under his belt, it's easy to see that there is a place for grindhouse genre film in mainstream cinema. And with Wan just releasing *Fast and Furious 7*, he branches out of pulse-stopping horror and into hard-hitting, fast paced, car-based action.

Australia has recently gone back to some of its favourite low-budget films, remaking them for a modern audience; *Long Weekend* (2008), *Patrick* (2013) and most recently, *Turkey Shoot* (2014) were all subject to this treatment. An obvious sign that Australia is attempting to bring life back to its film industry with wild genre films, but maybe it isn't ready to give a new director the creative freedom they would have with a new story or property similar to those of the Ozploitation heyday. *The Babadook*, written and directed by Jennifer Kent, is a perfect example of this. It's a low

budget, but amazingly creative film, and incredibly well received amongst genre fans. Although the film was backed by government bodies, Kent still needed more funding and Kickstarter was the place to get it. *The Babadook* shows us it can be done and that these films are wanted.

We know Australia can produce some terrific action and horror flicks, so hopefully we'll have some original work from talent like McLean coming back to the big screen and not just straight to DVD, hidden within the bargain bin waiting to be discovered. Although sometimes isn't that half the fun? Not all these exploitation films are worthwhile, but they all deserve some merit for successfully creating a completed film on a little-to-nothing budget. We have to thank this era of films for the amount of entertainment that comes from Australian talent today. It would be fantastic to see more lower budget films in the cinema. Films with higher creativity that do not sacrifice integrity for an overly sensitive audience, remaining as those thrilling genre films we've come to love so much.



SKY PIRATES, 1986



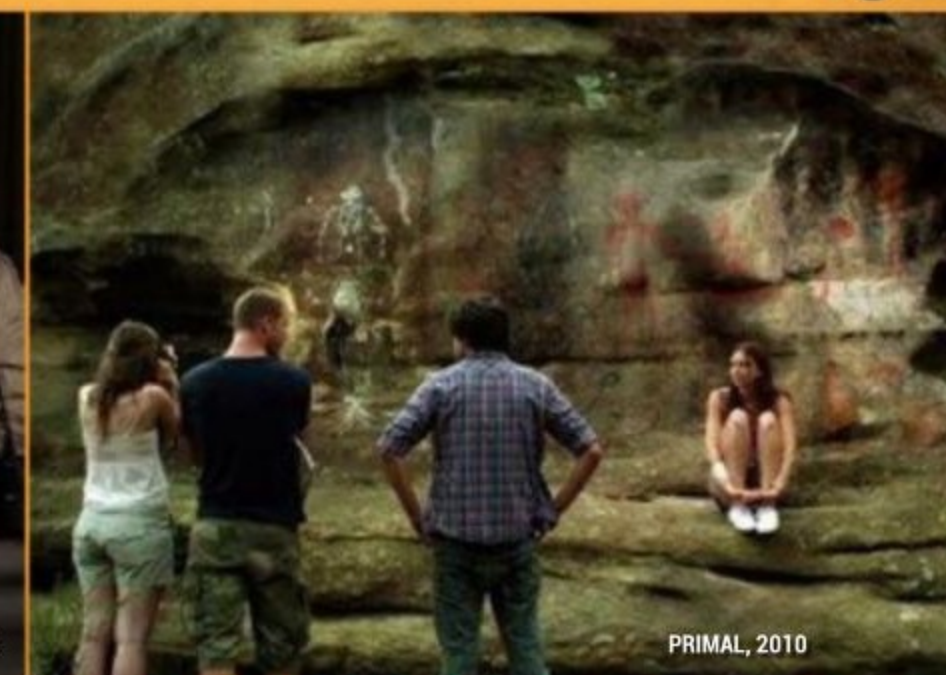
WOLF CREEK, 2005



WOLF CREEK 2, 2013



RED HILL, 2010



PRIMAL, 2010