Thriller
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Shifts in genre definitions and classifications over time are very much a part of a living art form such as cinema. Films that today we might identify as bearing some of the hallmarks of the thriller, but which were not understood as such at the time of release, have been made in Australia since the earliest days of narrative cinema. *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906) contains some of the thriller's stock elements: crime, conspiracy, suspense, a chase, heroes and villains. The fact that these elements are not exclusive to the thriller underscores the point that genres change, evolve, and often overlap. While contemporary reportage attests that *The Story of the Kelly Gang* thrilled audiences, it was not named as a 'thriller' at the time. Even so, a genealogy of the thriller can be traced through Australian film history, despite quiescent periods.

Even in those periods in which the thriller was a prominent feature of Australian cinema, critical work on the genre here is relatively thin on the ground. For example, although Scott Murray (1994, p.97) asserts that the genre was a 'main staple of the 10BA era' (ie. the 1980s), importantly he fails to define the term, assuming perhaps that it is widely understood and agreed upon when this is not necessarily the case in Australia, just as it is not overseas. Taking up Jerry Palmer's (1978) argument that the thriller can be reduced to just two essential elements (a hero and a conspiracy), Paul Cobley proposes that 'the threat of conspiracy [is] the thriller's prime mover' (Cobley 2000, p.3). This rings especially true for the political thriller as I will expand on below. Cobley argues that 'the notion of conspiracy is so wide and accommodating that it *enables* an expansive range of diverse texts' (Cobley 2000, p.3).

It is precisely the expansiveness of the thriller that leads Martin Rubin to argue that it is perhaps best understood as a 'metagenre' rather than a genre because '[t]he range of stories that have been called thrillers is simply too broad' to be contained by a single generic label or set of codes and conventions (Rubin 1999, p.4). In similar vein, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson observe that like comedy the thriller is 'a very broad category, virtually an umbrella genre' (Bordwell and Thompson 2003, p.112). Other critics argue that the thriller is not a genre at all; Barry Keith Grant suggests it is 'a term that is more appropriately used to describe tone and … too vague as a generic category' (Grant 1995, p.503). Tom Ryall counters that, like comedies and horror films, thrillers were, and continue to be, identified in terms of the feelings that they induce in audiences (Ryall 1998). Rubin concurs, arguing that the thriller 'stresses *sensations* more than sensitivity', with suspense being 'one of the primary ingredients' (Rubin 1999, p.6). This point is taken up by Virginia Luzón Aguado (2002) in her analysis of the psychothriller, in which she argues that '[t]he most characteristic feature of the thriller would … seem to be the psychological effect that unremitting relentless suspense produces on the audience through the delayed resolution of

action, rather than elements that we could identify as generic features in terms of iconography, plot or formal structure' (2002, p.165). This expansiveness, coupled with the thriller's principal feature being the sensation induced in audiences rather than readily agreed upon generic codes and conventions, may be the reason why few of the books in the Directory of World Cinema series contain essays specifically on thrillers despite the fact that, like comedy or drama, they feature in the cinema of all film-producing countries.

Australian films labeled as thrillers either in advertising or by reviewers at the time of release date back at least to *Face at the Window* (the first film produced by theatrical entrepreneur DB O'Connor, directed by Charles Villiers, 1919). In a review in April 1920, the Launceston *Examiner* described this story of a master criminal in Paris, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Louis Feuillade's Fantômas series, as 'a stock thriller'. Contemporary advertising for the film promised 'the most sensational "thriller" that ever faced an audience or thrilled thousands on the screen!' Appearances like this of the term 'thriller' in Australian press coverage in the early twentieth century mirror to some extent Mark Jancovich's (2009) findings about the use of the terms 'horror' and 'thriller' in the American press in the 1940s. Jancovich (2009, p.158) not only notes that the two were used interchangeably, but also that 'thriller' 'was not used to describe a particular *type* of film but rather to describe films that featured a particular quality... "Thrillers" were simply *thrilling* films - films that "thrilled" audiences - but this reference to "thrills" connoted something more than simply mere "excitement" or "suspense"'. Indeed 'thriller' was used quite loosely to describe films that today might be classified as action or horror: in its review of *The Shadow of Lightning Ridge* (Wilfred Lucas, 1920) the Adelaide newspaper *The Register* referred to stunts performed by the legendary Australian actor and athlete Snowy Baker as 'thrillers'; and in an account of the decision to ban the Efftee short *The Haunted Barn* (E.A. Dietrich-Derrick, 1931) for its depiction of wailing winds that the Victorian state censor thought would frighten children, the Perth *Sunday Times* described the film as 'mystery thriller'. Pike and Cooper (1980 p.155), by contrast, note that the film was temporarily banned 'for its alleged horror content'.

The connection (and distinction) between horror and suspense films also forms the basis of Brian McFarlane's contribution to one of the first book-length critiques of Australian cinema after the revival, *The New Australian Cinema* (Murray 1980). Despite McFarlane's opening gambit that 'Horror and suspense have not been major elements in the Australian film renaissance of the 1970s' (McFarlane 1980, p.61), he provides a lengthy and detailed survey of the genres in the first decade of the revival, paying particular attention to films such as *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974), *Patrick* (Richard Franklin, 1978) and *Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1978) all of which are now considered to be exemplars of the Australian Gothic (see Rayner in this volume). By 2006, Albert Moran and Errol Vieth had much more material to work with, and consequently devote separate chapters to horror and 'the suspense thriller' in their book on Australian film genres (2006, pp.157-71).

Drawing on Charles Derry's typology of suspense thrillers originally developed in a book on

the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Moran and Vieth identify eight types of Australian suspense thriller. The erotic thriller, or 'Thriller of Murderous Passions' is exemplified in Moran and Vieth's study, erroneously in my view, by *Dead Calm* (Phillip Noyce, 1989); better examples would include *The Monkey's Mask* (Samantha Lang, 2000) and *In the Cut* (Jane Campion, 2003). The Australian archetype of the 'Thriller of Acquired Identity' is Robert Connolly's *The Bank* (2001), in which a software developer takes a job with the bank that caused his father's ruin with the intention of unleashing malicious code that will paralyse it. A more recent example is Daniel Nettheim's *The Hunter* (2011) in which an American mercenary (Willem Dafoe) hired by a biotech company poses as a naturalist in order to capture a Tasmanian tiger (long thought to be extinct in the wild) and harvest its genes. In the 'Psychotraumatic Thriller', a victim's past trauma is exploited by others for gain. Moran and Vieth suggest Frank Shields' *Hostage: The Christine Maresch Story* (1983), in which a woman is forced by her psychotic husband to commit a series of robberies; a contemporary example is Kieran Darcy-Smith's *Wish You Were Here* (2012), in which a young Australian couple are harassed by a crime syndicate following a holiday tragedy in Cambodia. The 'Thriller of Moral Confrontation' is at base the clash between 'good' and 'evil' characters. Noyce's *Dead Calm* is an obvious candidate, with John and Rae Ingram (Sam Neill and Nicole Kidman) confronted by Billy Zane's psychopath Hughie Warriner. Moran and Vieth cite the little-known feature *Running From the Guns* (John Dixon, 1987) as the Australian example of Derry's self-explanatory 'Innocent-on-the-Run Thriller'. More widely seen examples would include Bill Bennett's *Kiss or Kill* (1997) - although the lovers-on-the-run are far from innocent - and Craig Lahiff's *Heaven's Burning* (1997) in which a runaway Japanese bride is caught up in the aftermath of a bank robbery gone wrong. Lahiff returned to the theme again in 2011's *Swerve*, in which a man's decision to take a bag of cash he finds by the side of the road to the police in a small country town is the catalyst for a series of unfortunate events. (Lahiff's rarely seen 1989 feature *Fever*, incidentally, begins with the same plot device, although the story takes a somewhat different course.) The race against the clock that defines the 'Thriller of Time' is a common device in many films and genres; Australian examples include Ian Barry's sci fi-thriller *The Chain Reaction* (1980) about a nuclear waste spillage, and the comedy-thriller *Two Hands* (Gregor Jordan, 1999), in which low-level gangster Jimmy (Heath Ledger) loses $10,000 of his boss's money and must find a way to pay it back or face the wrath of the mob. The 'Thriller of Place' restricts its drama to a few key settings, and again illustrates the tendency for genre-blending, with films that could be classified as horror providing prime Australian examples. *Bait* (Kimble Rendall, 2012) is set in a flooded supermarket following a tsunami, with the unfortunate surviving shoppers menaced by sharks. In *The Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1979), a city couple's beach holiday turns into a nightmare as nature takes its revenge.

The last category is the 'Political Thriller'. Despite Australian filmmakers' longstanding interest in Australian history and dramatisations of real events, and despite a wealth of potential subjects, political thrillers have featured occasionally, but perhaps not in the numbers that might be expected given the rich subject matter in Australian history and mythology. Politicians and politics

have, by contrast, been regular targets of Australian comedies from Raymond Longford's second adaptation of Steele Rudd's Dad and Dave stories, *Rudd's New Selection* (1921) to PJ Hogan's *Mental* (2012). Corrupt politicians feature in satirical comedies including *Muriel's Wedding* (PJ Hogan, 1994) and *A Sting in the Tail* (Eugene Schlusser, 1989), but these in no way could be claimed to be political thrillers. That said, there are some notable examples of thrillers built around a core conspiracy involving police corruption (such as Esben Storm's *Deadly*, 1992; Tony Martin's *Bad Eggs*, 2003; and the Australian western *Red Hill*, Patrick Hughes, 2010). Other notable Australian thrillers feature political cover-ups (Terry Ohlsson's *Scobie Malone,* 1975), revolutionary plots (Arthur Shirley's *The Sealed Room*, 1926; Esben Storm's *With Prejudice* 1982), corrupt corporate dealings (Robert Connolly's *The Bank*, 2001) and international intrigues and scandals (Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*, 1982; John Duigan's *Far East*, 1982; Robert Connolly's *Balibo*, 2009). Thrillers about the politics and consequences of nuclear accidents or nuclear war date back to Stanley Kramer's 1960 adaptation of Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach*, which was followed ten years later by Giorgio Mangiamele's *Beyond Reason* (1970), in which staff and patients at a mental hospital take refuge in a basement following a nuclear attack. Another decade on, *The Chain Reaction* (Ian Barry, 1980) took up the theme anew. In a different vein is Gary L. Keady's *Sons of Steel* (1989), more of a science fiction comedy than a thriller, which features a rock singer/peace activist who travels back in time to prevent a nuclear disaster. Perhaps the best of this cycle was *Ground Zero* (Michael Pattinson and Bruce Myles, 1987), which centres on a conspiracy and cover-up around the 1950s British nuclear tests in the South Australian outback.

The relative dearth of political thrillers makes it even more surprising and noteworthy that two lightly fictionalised versions of the same story, albeit made in wildly different styles, were released within months of each other in 1981 and 1982. Both *The Killing of Angel Street* (Donald Crombie, 1981) and *Heatwave* (Phillip Noyce, 1982) are thrillers, though only the former can properly be described as a political thriller since the latter eschews the suggestion of political machinations and (unusually in Australian films) treats the property developer character sympathetically, at least until the final shot. Both films take as their subject the contentious redevelopment of inner Sydney in the 1970s, which pitted property developers and incumbent politicians against local residents and the New South Wales branch of one of the major construction unions. And both reference the mysterious disappearance of anti-development campaigner and newspaper publisher Juanita Nielsen in 1975. Of the two films, *Angel Street* is much more overtly concerned with the issue of corruption and collusion between developers, the police and the government, set against the background of the 'green bans' under which residents' action groups opposed to development were supported by the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation (NSWBLF). For several years in the early to mid-1970s the NSWBLF barred its members from working on construction sites that its leaders deemed ecologically or socially harmful. *Angel Street*'s key creatives held a widely shared certainty that Nielsen's disappearance and the harassment of residents were the result of a conspiracy that reached from the murky criminal underworld of

Kings Cross right up to the highest levels of government – a belief that was reinforced by the several warnings they received to drop the project before it went into production (see Goldsmith 2012).

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