

**'Backroads' from *Phillip Noyce* by Ingo Petzke
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Chapter 3

BACKROADS

Once again, it was a pub that I had to turn up to.

Jack (Bill Hunter), a white vagrant and Gary (Gary Foley), a young Aborigine, steal a car and head around outback New South Wales, picking up fellow travellers and stealing booze, guns and fancy clothes while heading towards the coast. After a drunken killing, they are hunted down by police and arrested. Gary tries to escape but is eventually shot down.

Noyce considers *Backroads* his first feature film, despite its length of just 60 minutes and the fact that it was shot on 16 millimetre filmstock. It is clearly influenced by other directors' work.

Monte Hellman's *Two Lane Black Top* left me fascinated with American road movies when I saw it in 1974 in London and at the 1975 Sydney Film Festival. Wim Wenders' film *Kings of the Road* mesmerised with its elegance. And another influence was John Cassavetes' films, which introduced the idea of improvisation.

There may have been some other influence as well, which David Stratton notes: '. . . Noyce [had] also been impressed with the way Andy Warhol let his "personalities" improvise.'¹ But Noyce refutes this claim, hinting at the usual confusion surrounding the master of making waves: 'Well, it wasn't Andy Warhol so much as Paul Morrissey in *Heat* and *Trash*.'

John Emery, Adelaide author of the short story that my film-school short *Caravan Park* was based on, had written another story about a young Aborigine, 'The First Day of Spring'. It opened with the Aboriginal character being released from the police lock-up at dawn in some outback town. Anyway, I went over and spent some time talking to John and he wrote some sort of script, which I added to. I don't remember what the document was that I used to raise money on, because I do know that most of the film was improvised. But there must have been some scenes that were written by John Emery, as well as some written by me, in the final film. I just can't remember exactly where John stopped and I started, or which ones are improvised.

Basically, it's the story of a white drifter and a young Aborigine who together steal a car in the outback and drive across-country, heading for the coast. And that car becomes a vacuum, their own world where they are kings and free to engage in intense discussions and to develop relationships between themselves and with the people they pick up along the way.

In looking around for someone to play the young Aborigine, fellow director Ken Cameron, who also suggested the title of *Backroads*, gave me some newspaper articles about Gary Foley, who was one of Australia's young black activists at the time – a handsome firebrand with matinee idol looks. I was told to ring Gary at a pub in the Aboriginal ghetto of Redfern called The Cricketer's Arms. I rang and went over to this pub full of Aborigines and told Gary that I wanted him to be a movie star. And Gary said he didn't want any part of white man's bullshit unless he got to monitor all of the black content. So we reached this agreement that he could rewrite his dialogue whenever he thought it was bullshit; he could have a say in the movie's content.

If Noyce allowed Foley so much influence on the film's script, plot and editing, was he afraid of losing his artistic authority?

No, it was consultation – and this was well before 'cultural consultation' became an in-thing. If you're a white person trying to capture an indigenous attitude and spirit, the only way you can do that is by consulting, by listening to the indigenous point of view. Now it's become a mantra but . . . It wasn't so much about being democratic on that film as admitting that the middle-class white man was always going to be outside an indigenous mentality. The only way I could ever gain access was to listen – consult and listen. And who could better capture the spirit of Aboriginal slang, than Gary himself?

The choice of Foley as lead actor was significant. In 1972, he was instrumental in setting up the 'Tent Embassy' in front of Parliament House in Canberra, which put Aboriginal affairs firmly on the agenda of the Whitlam government. One year earlier, 'he had hoaxed the *Australian* newspaper into believing there was a highly militant Black Panther chapter in Australia'.² In a typical seventies manner he participated in street theatre groups, made films and was active in the music scene, 'appearing as a guest singer with The Clash on their Australian tour in 1981'.³

Elizabeth Knight was going to be first assistant director on the movie. She had been the first assistant director on *Let the Balloon Go*, a feature film that I worked on in 1975 as second assistant director at Film Australia. I was looking for someone to play the white racist drifter, Jack. Elizabeth had worked at the ABC with a guy called Bill Hunter and so once again, it was a pub that I had to turn up to.

It was somewhere in or around Surry Hills. I think it was the same pub on the corner of William and Riley Streets where I used to have to throw

stones at the window to wake up Cec Holmes, the famous director for whom I worked as a production assistant at Film Australia when I was eighteen. Anyway, Hunter came out on the footpath and I told him the story of the movie and said, 'Can you read a scene from the script?' He said, 'I'm dyslexic, can't read.' So I said, 'Oh well, here's the story of the character.' And he said, 'OK; I'll do a few scenes for you.' He invented several long monologues on the spot and he was incredible. He was the character.

So I cast Gary, who was a great speaker and had already said that he wanted to monitor the black content, and Hunter who, once you gave him a couple of beers, you couldn't shut up. One thing led to another and we were suddenly improvising everything.

The most important thing about improvisation is to get the actors to understand who they are playing – the imaginary character – and then hopefully they become so involved in the character that they start to speak with the character's voice, and once you press the button they'll just start to talk and think like the character. They become scriptwriters and actors in one, within a sort of circle of creativity that the director weaves around them. Gary was completely armed and ready to start speaking with the character's voice. He knew the character better than the director, the writer – anyone. So this guy was playing a variation of himself. He had come from the country; he grew up around Aboriginal reserves. The finished film represents 100 per cent the original story, but 80 per cent of the dialogue was made up on the spot by the actors.

Initially, Gary and I went on a location survey to find a route that the film might follow through the back roads of New South Wales.

The Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission had given us twenty thousand dollars to make the film.

I had spent three thousand dollars buying a 1962 Pontiac Parisienne, a big American car that would be one of the stars of the movie. But it broke down after about half a day, and from then on it had to be jump-started and pushed; it was a complete wreck.⁴ The crew consisted of myself; Lloyd Carrick on sound; Russell Boyd (who in 2004 won the Oscar for Best Cinematography for Peter Weir's *Master and Commander*) as DoP and his assistant, Jan Kenny; Jan Chapman, my wife, and Martha Ansara as production assistants; first assistant, Elizabeth Knight; Kevin Smith, who came along as Gary's bodyguard; and the actors, Hunter, Foley, Terry Camilleri, Zac Martin and Julie McGregor. We travelled across New South Wales in a convoy of about four vehicles out to Bourke, then through Brewarrina and back. The four-week shoot ended up at Wollombi in the Hunter Valley, three hours from Sydney, where my family owned a farm. We all lived on the farm and shot the final sequences around there.

It was complex shooting because we were improvising scenes in both the front and the back of the car that were to be intercut with each other. I hadn't yet realised you could use prop wine or beer, so the flagons of sherry and white wine and stuff that were being passed around and the beer that had been consumed were all real, so by the end of most scenes everyone was drunk. I don't know how we kept it up, actually.

It was a pretty weird experience because there was frequently a lot of tension between the white and the black members of the crew and cast, and there wasn't a lot of money. Everyone was paid the same amount, three hundred dollars per week, including Russell Boyd.

Access to the Aboriginal camps was a result of being with Gary. The camp in the film was at Bourke. When you think about it, seeing all those Aborigines herded behind barbed wire is a real indictment, isn't it?

People often wonder how we did the shots inside the travelling car. Russell had done that before, and so he brought along this limpet mount that he would attach to the side of the car with the camera mounted on it. The drunken actors would drive, and I would be strapped on to the front hood of the speeding car. Lloyd Carrick was in the trunk recording sound, surrounded by exhaust fumes. It was very hairy! When I needed to speak to the actors I would shout to them.

I would start and stop the camera from the hood by pressing a remote. We would check it beforehand and afterwards to make sure it had stayed still. Great stuff. When we were filming scenes in the back seat, the camera would be handheld in the car. Insurance could have been a problem, but there was no insurance. We only saw what we had been shooting once we returned to Sydney at the end of the four weeks.

All the points-of-view (POV) shots from the car I actually shot several months later. Jan Chapman's brother had moved to Perth and we agreed to drive his car over to him. So while Jan drove, I photographed out the window between Sydney and Perth. Those shots are probably overused and the film becomes a little tedious in the end with all of these POVs.

For lighting, we just had 800-watt red heads and a couple of sun guns. And some bounce boards. Maybe six lights.

During the shoot we sometimes had problems with Gary, who was suspicious of the whole enterprise. After the film came out and all the years since then, we have been the best of friends. He is now curator of the indigenous exhibition at Melbourne's Museum Victoria and a historian. He is the fittest of any of us, which he finds remarkable because 54 is a late age for a male Aborigine, according to statistics of indigenous Australian mortality. As Gary has remarked, he has increasingly few Aboriginal friends that are still alive.

Towards the end of the shoot we ran out of money. Fortunately for me, two days, worth of rushes were destroyed by the lab. So we charged the lab full professional rates for the insurance claim they put in, which yielded sufficient money to complete shooting. If we hadn't had the good fortune to lose two days' shooting, the film may never have been finished.

But I still had to go out and earn extra money. David Huggett was the editor; Frans Vandenburg, who would later cut *Shadows of the Peacock*, was his assistant. I left Film Australia and took a job as a producer back at the film school. I was employed to mentor a group of students as they made a drama. I didn't do much mentoring because I was really there just to earn a few hundred dollars more each week so that I could keep David

Huggett editing. I would leave the students on location and hurry back to the editing room.

When Gary first saw the film he made some suggestions, for changes, which I adopted. We had shot a sequence with Essie Coffey, an Aboriginal female leader, talking to Julie McGregor's character on a riverbank. The original cut of the film didn't include that sequence. As it is now, in the final film, it's sort of a non sequitur. Suddenly this new character is talking to Julie McGregor about what the white man had done to the Aborigines and it sort of comes out of nowhere.

Gary thought the sequence was important as a documentary record of attitudes at a particular moment in time, and within the jagged context of the whole movie it probably contributed a lot. I wanted the film to be this weird mixture of the formal and the anarchic in style and content. On the one hand it's a C road movie – not B, not A, but a C, like *Cannonball Express*, for example: the duel between the car and the semi-trailer. I also wanted it to be a serious A road movie, like *Kings of the Road*, with formal transition devices from silent films. And then I wanted it to be almost a direct cinema documentary – for example, the sequence where the guys are singing around the campfire in the Aboriginal reserve. Another influence was *Antonio Das Mortes*, the Brazilian film by Glauber Rocha, which was also quite stylised, yet mixed elements of theatre and B movie exploitation cinema.

The ending of the film undoubtedly seems flawed – due to the haste caused by the film's financial problems. But at the same time it looks much more politically correct than was intended in the script.

'Originally, the people in the stolen car – the two Aborigines and the white man – end up by causing a traffic jam on the approach to the [Sydney] Harbour Bridge. They abandon the car, leaving it among a mass of vehicles, and disappear into the concrete jungle. The last shot was to be three or four miles of traffic stacked up behind the car.

'We were actually going to stage a breakdown on the freeway and just film it. Gary, however, felt that politically it was a cop-out. The journey these men undertake was always seen as an allegory of the journey white men and the Aborigines took together over the past 200 years – and that journey, as we know, has been ultimately tragic for the Aborigines. So, Gary felt the film should end tragically and that his character should be killed. And that is the way we shot it.

'I am not really happy with the ending. We didn't have enough resources of money and manpower to do the sort of ending that we finally compromised on. Also, I had been planning the other ending for more than a year and we only changed it at the last minute.'⁵

The film premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in June 1977, and in general received a rather lukewarm response. This didn't bother Noyce too much:

It was my first long drama, so I was fine with it. What could I do? I had no expectation, really.

However, there were other reactions as the film's 'threatening attitude seemed to alarm some members of the audience not used to this kind of confronting cinema in locally-made productions', as Stratton remembers.⁶ Typical of contemporary attitudes was Keith Connolly, who conceded that '*Backroads* by no means is a failure' but complained that 'its chief weakness is a want of cohesion'. He continued, 'The film falters when Noyce detours into a segment of talking-head discourse by shanty-camp blacks. This presumably is intended to background an ongoing debate between the principals, but the documentary-style sequence is such an abrupt change of pace that it blunts rather than reinforces the polemic about the plight of the Aborigines.'⁷

But no matter how irritated the critics were – mostly, anecdotal evidence suggests, by the frequent use of the 'four-letter word', which earned the film an R rating – two aspects of the film were readily acknowledged: the 'stunning photography by Russell Boyd'⁸ and its 'contemporary importance'⁹. '*Backroads* does throw a strong light on the degradation of Aboriginal life in contemporary Australia . . . The film's real strength lies in the authentic exchanges between Gary and Jack.'¹⁰

Significant among the contemporary critics was P.P. McGuiness in *The National Times*.¹¹ '[I]t is the most effective and technically accomplished dramatic film that I have seen . . . on the maltreatment and hopelessness of Aborigines in our society . . . Noyce manages to avoid sentimentality and cliché . . . which allows him to handle the real problems of contemporary Australian society without descent into facile sentiment or tedious propaganda.' A minor complaint is: 'Possibly the film errs towards melodrama at the end . . . [but at least Noyce] never allows the film to stop while we are given a political lecture.'

Noyce admits that *Backroads* is 'a very difficult film to come to grips with'.

'The characters are generally unattractive and it is a film where I have sought to investigate so-called "unmotivated crime". And this makes it additionally difficult for an audience to feel sympathy for the characters. The realism and forcefulness of the characters have also tended to provoke personal prejudices in some viewers, reactions that have been confused by their attitudes to certain behaviour. You always bring your own prejudices to a film so you can't really blame critics – you just have to find a way of pointing out to them how your film might appeal.'¹²

But once the film was selected for the Berlin Film Festival in February 1978 and was consequently picked up by Scala, a small British distributor, the situation improved greatly.

It was screened at Berlin and, yes, Wim Wenders liked it and so did Werner Herzog. And then it was screened in the Market Place in Cannes, not in any official capacity. Gary and I hired a little theatre, handed out advertising leaflets and screened it. Soon afterwards, it opened in London at the Scala.

It seems that *Backroads* was understood very well in Europe, where from the outset responses were much more positive in some ways than in Australia.

'Suddenly it all came back to me what the film was intended to be about. It was a revelation to me that somewhere in the world there were critics who loved cinema and would approach the film not looking for what was wrong with it and how it could therefore be condemned, but rather what was right with it, what its good qualities were. Unlike the critics in Australia, European critics are able to largely ignore the things that don't work in a film and draw out for audiences its positive aspects.'¹³

Admittedly, however, not all the foreign critics were raving. *Variety*, typically for most of Noyce's career so far, dismissed the film – this time as 'a schematic look at race relations . . . too arbitrary and predictable to take on greater meaning than the incidents themselves represent'.¹⁴ Despite, or rather because of that, it 'is regarded in Australia as an important social document'.¹⁵

With some distance, the importance of *Backroads* has become even more evident. It is an 'admirably angry film, a sort of *Easy Rider* accusing Australia of a deeply engrained racism'.¹⁶ And it was the first film to do just that in a very graphic way. 'With some redirection by Gary Foley, Noyce ended up with a statement much stronger than he ever set out to make.'¹⁷

What naturally couldn't be seen back in 1978 becomes obvious today. *Backroads* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* act as a kind of brackets around Noyce's Australian work. Different as they are in content and intention, they are both based on the perhaps most Australian of concepts of the self: being on the road. It is celebrated in the unofficial national anthem 'Waltzing Matilda', as well as in the high-powered *Mad Max* films. Being on the move – not arriving – is the name of the game. Gary and Jack are heading nowhere – despite their odyssey leading them from the outback to the eastern seaboard, where contact was first established between the Aborigines and the Europeans. The journey is undertaken by car, the white man's way, to stretches of land that have long since lost all traces of Aboriginal identity.

Today, the rights for *Backroads* are held by Foley – maybe a personal sign of reconciliation from Noyce's side.

After a certain point I could see that the person who had invested the most in the movie was Gary. So I said to him, 'You didn't get paid much for what you've done, so you can have the rights to the film. You could make some money out of it, because there is always some new distribution outlet invented that we didn't figure on five years ago.'

What did the film mean back then, and what does it mean to Noyce today?

It was my first attempt to make a longer dramatic film. It was finished at a time when Australian audiences were very enthusiastic about national cinema and it was very much a learning process in terms of sizing up that audience. I realised from screening the film in its limited release that a

story dealing with indigenous characters and themes was attractive to audiences because of its relative uniqueness. But there was very much a limit to the Australian audience that wanted to see such stories. So, in a way, I made a mental note to myself about how to find the audience that naturally wanted to respond to a story like that, but also about how you might break through to the ones that thought they *didn't* want to see a film with indigenous characters. From screening *Backroads* around Australia and watching and listening to the audience, a lot of lessons were filed away for another 24 years to be used in making and selling *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

The two stories are set just 45 years apart, but they are in reality separated by 150 years. One deals with indigenous characters on the eastern seaboard of Australia, where contact started to take place from 1778 with the establishment of the first penal colony, and where by the 1970s Aboriginal culture was almost at its lowest point, almost utterly decimated. Whereas *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is set in the West Australian desert in the last areas settled by white people. Back in 1931, and even today, Aboriginal people in this area have managed to cling to some of their traditional lifestyle and certainly have managed to maintain spiritual connections to their traditional lands. So, the films are very different. One is about hopelessness, and the other is about hope. Hope being much more possible where the Aboriginal people have managed to cling to just a little bit of what they had when Europeans first came to Australia.

¹ David Stratton, *The Last New Wave* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980), p. 204.

² Stephen Muecke, 'Backroads: From identity to interval', *Senses of Cinema*, Nr 17, 2001.

³ Ibid.

⁴ It eventually ended up in a publicity stunt. 'I towed it out onto the front lawn of Sydney University and then as a stunt to raise interest in the movie I brought along six sledgehammers and invited the students to wreck the car.' Raffaele Caputo and Geoff Burton, *Third Take – Australian Filmmakers Talk* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 149.

⁵ Mary Moody, 'Phil Noyce', *Cinema Papers*, October 1977, p. 112.

⁶ Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, p. 205.

⁷ Keith Connolly, 'Love Letters from Teralba and Backroads', *Cinema Papers*, January 1978, p. 262.

⁸ Paul Heinrichs, 'Censors re-route *Backroads* signal', *Age*, 1 July 1977.

⁹ Helen Frizell, 'Today's history in form of fiction', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 1978.

¹⁰ John Pym, 'Backroads', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1978, p. 171.

¹¹ P.P. McGuinness, 'An exciting road movie with a few sermons along the way', *The National Times*, 27 June 1977.

¹² Cited in Moody, 'Phil Noyce', p. 112.

¹³ Cited in Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, p. 205.

¹⁴ 'Backroads', *Variety*, 6 May 1981, p. 24.

15 David White, *Australian Movies to the World. The International Success of Australian Film since 1970* (Sydney: Fontana Australia, 1984), p. 60.

16 Andrew Tudor, 'The Aussie picture show', in Albert Moran and Tom O'Reagan, *An Australian Film Reader* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), p. 213.

17 Anne Hutton, 'Black Australia and film – only it makes money', in Moran and O'Reagan, *An Australian Film Reader*, p. 336.