



# Unfulfilled Desires

## THE SMART GENRE CINEMA OF LAKE MUNGO

Smart, well-crafted and genuinely creepy genre cinema may well save the Australian film industry, writes **Rjurik Davidson**.

**T**HE FIGURE OF the ghost is a cultural universal – as far as we know, it has featured in all cultures and through all times. There are references to ghosts in the Bible and in ancient Chinese texts, while animism and ancestor worship are elements of many pre-literate religions. The most famous ghost in English literature is a Shakespearean creation: Hamlet's father, who warns Hamlet of 'Murder most foul' and sets into train the tragic sequence of events. The development of science has done little to dispel the power of the ghost, for the figure finds its roots not in death, but in life itself: the most common ghost is that poor spirit who cannot leave the earthly plane because their task here is not yet done. And who among us does not feel the terrible weight of death creeping up on us, depriving us of all the things we *should* have done if only we'd had the time?

The ghost then is the inverse figure of our own desires, the reminder in symbolic form that when death comes the equation of our experiences and our desires will most likely be unbalanced. Perhaps it is for this reason that the child-ghost is among the most frightening of all: the sound of ghostly children laughing as they run down an empty hall is one of the great tropes of the horror genre.

*Lake Mungo* (Joel Anderson, 2008) may well be the creepiest movie I've seen for many

years. After sixteen-year-old Alice Palmer (Talia Zucker) drowns in a lake, strange apparitions begin to appear in her family's house. Her brother Matthew (Martin Sharpe) sets up a number of video cameras, and the footage seems to confirm that Alice's spirit restlessly haunts the house. We glimpse her sitting in the wicker chair at the end of the bed, moving along the hallway, in the reflection of a mirror.

The effect on her family is profound. Alice's mother June (Rosie Traynor) is convinced that Alice is still alive and that father Russell (David Pledger) misidentified the body found in the lake. They hire psychic Ray Kemeney (Steve Jodrell) to help them. Alice's secret life is gradually revealed: like so many teenagers, she kept secrets from all those around her, and some of those secrets are dark indeed. But is the footage taken in the house really of Alice? And what happened to her on the fateful school camping trip to Lake Mungo?

Shot in a documentary style, *Lake Mungo* achieves a level of verisimilitude unusual in these kinds of films. The script is excellent: the twists and turns are very well paced, the internecine interrelations of the characters well crafted, the conclusion satisfying. The direction of debut feature filmmaker Joel Anderson is sure, and John Brawley's cinematography (including home movies, still photography, phone cameras) is impressive. Finally, the performances are first rate: no

single actor fails to evoke their character (apparently the interview scenes were at least partly improvised), right down to the hesitations and half-sentences that make up real speech.

Often in such ghost stories the third act is a disappointment – not in *Lake Mungo*. What's more, with a couple of tiny exceptions, it avoids the gratuitousness of *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005), which relies more strictly on horror – gore and nightmares of powerlessness – to achieve its effects. By contrast, *Lake Mungo* achieves that rare feat of unnerving creepiness as the unexplainable slowly impinges on the Palmers' lives. The film subtly rises in tension and fear and avoids cheap shocks or tricks. Perhaps we can again see the influence of David Lynch in an Australian film (after the recent *Beautiful* [Dean O'Flaherty, 2009]) – Lynch's *Twin Peaks* television series was also about a drowned girl called Palmer, though it obviously has other important differences.

The grainy likeness of Alice, counterposed to her image in videos, still photography and the words of her family, evokes an unusual creepiness, enhanced by the fact that we rarely ever see the apparition clearly. It *looks* like Alice but *is it really?* The images then allow the audience to activate their imaginations. One of the greatest rules in the horror movie (and book) is that a creature is scarier before it is actually seen by the audience, because each audience member is able to project onto the creature the image of their own fear. Moreover, fear is usually a response to a danger or threat, but what makes the ghost story so frightening is the terror of the unknown and the breakdown of what we consider the usual rules of our existence. If ghosts exist, then what can we say about all the other everyday rules we take for granted? *Lake Mungo* evokes such fears with accomplishment. Indeed, when I sat down to watch it, having read nothing in advance, for some time I was unsure whether it was in fact a documentary or a fictional film, which indicates the level of Anderson's technical triumph.

Yet for a film to rise from good to great, formal mastery is not enough – a film must have something to say. *Lake Mungo* is disappointing in this aspect, for it only occasionally touches upon the deeper issues at stake. The ultimate questions of the ghost story are: who is the ghost and why do they continue to haunt a particular locale? Though we only see glimpses of her throughout the movie, Talia Zucker's Alice embodies all the loveliness and contradictions of the teenage girl:

she is alternately childlike, beautiful, coming into her power, withdrawn. As the film progresses, it slowly uncovers some of her secrets: her hidden sexual life, for example. And yet never do we really come to understand this with much depth. Alice remains elusive.

As a study of grief, *Lake Mungo* is a little more successful. We get some idea of the variety of responses to her death from those closest to her. Much of the film follows the successive reactions of Alice's family and friends to the various revelations about her life, and of course to the mysterious apparitions that appear to be her. Can they all come to terms with her death? Can they let her go?

Together these two aspects – the teenage girl, the response to her death of those closest – provide an entrance-point into the question of the family. The troubled relationship with her mother is most prominent. Alice and June are very much alike, and yet they are distant from each other. June was never able to truly give herself over to Alice. It is in these moments that the brilliance of the still photography and the home movies comes across: the slight turning away of the two in a photograph, their playful interaction on silent grainy video footage. The visual aspects of the film, rather than the dialogue, are most powerful. By contrast, the father has a much more distant relationship with Alice, and after her death buries himself in work. The representation of her brother's response, as someone always 'close' to Alice, is the most vague and ephemeral, yet plays the greatest role in terms of the plot development (at times his motivations seem a little far-fetched). It is only at the end of the film that the interrelations of the family members truly come to the fore.

So the institution of the family is here dealt with in isolation and without great depth – Anderson prefers to keep the twists and turns coming, a decision that makes the film rattle along at a rapid pace, leaving the viewer engrossed. But perhaps there is also a missed opportunity for Anderson to pursue the greater character studies that might have illuminated the institution of the family more brightly. The family, of course, has a long and complicated history: supported as a 'natural' institution (often ordained by God) by conservatives, it is equally critiqued by leftists and feminists. Someone like second wave radical feminist Kate Millet, in her 1969 book *Sexual Politics*, wrote that

*Patriarchy's chief institution is the family ... Mediating between the individual and the*

*social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient ... Even in patriarchal societies where they are granted legal citizenship, women tend to be ruled through the family alone and have little or no formal relation to the state.*<sup>1</sup>

Rather than examining these kinds of dynamics – whether they be of intimacy and support, control and conformity – within the family, and its connections with the broader society, *Lake Mungo* glosses over them.

Consider June and Alice's relationship. Why is it so ambivalent? Some feminists, particularly those who have (mainly during the 1980s) analysed the nature of motherhood and parenting, might take a Freudian perspective on this, which would concentrate on their relations as sexual beings.<sup>2</sup> In this view, female children begin with an attachment to their mothers, as the initial providers of 'pleasure' but at a certain point reject the mother in favour of the father – obviously something that Anderson gestures to in Alice and June's relationship. This particular kind of dynamic (and it would not have needed to focus on June and Alice's relationship, but could have included Alice's relations to any of the other characters) might have been more greatly explored by *Lake Mungo*. That is, Anderson might have used Alice's death as a way of unhinging all of the family interrelationships. The point is not that these things aren't broached at all in *Lake Mungo*, but that they are never richly or deeply examined. The film teases us with its possibilities, and never quite rises to them.

*Lake Mungo* is one of a new breed of Australian genre films following others such as *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005) and *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, 2005). It seems that the Australian film industry has shifted towards genre because of its eminent marketability, just as there has been such a trend in international film. Australian movies cannot, of course, compete with Hollywood blockbusters. They can, however, create more modest productions that make use of the popular benefits of genre: the already established tropes of ongoing cultural power. These tropes include the classic symbols of horror: the ghost, the zombie, the vampire. They include the myths of the western: the frontier, the cowboy, the lawless land. They include the structures of the crime novel and film.

Why these structures are so popular is an important and as yet unanswered question. Audiences certainly respond to the estrange-

ment of genre: the sense that this world is not our own. In some cases, we simply escape our own world, as a matter of consolation. The film therefore acts as a fantasy of wish fulfillment. The audience wishes they were the superhero with superpowers, able to conquer the challenges before it. But in the best case, the estrangement allows the audience to see their own world anew, and to reassess that world. The former tend to be the more successful films. The latter tend to be the more worthwhile.

Accessing and manipulating generic structures does not guarantee a film's success. Nevertheless, the Australian movie industry needs smart, low-budget genre films, and *Lake Mungo* is a perfect example. There has been much discussion in the industry of the fact that Australian audiences don't go and see Australian movies. And it seems to me that there *has* been too much of a concentration on gritty suburban dramas with the taint of 'worthiness' and 'preachiness' and that Australian film just might be saved by intelligent genre movies such as *Lake Mungo*. Its reception will be an interesting test case.

In any case, *Lake Mungo* gestures towards the more serious side of the genre spectrum. It uses genre to create an engaging, creepy and exciting movie that also begins to ask us to re-examine our own world and our own lives. It looks at a family and their response to grief and loss, but despite its obvious triumphs, it never delves as deeply into these issues as it could have. It remains a terrifically effective ghost story, one that sends shivers down the spine and is well worth the time spent watching – if that's your kind of movie. True, it doesn't *quite* succeed as a film that resonates long after viewing, or which *deeply* explores the questions: what is a family? What is loss? What is grief? For many people that lack of depth won't matter. They'll be satisfied with the eerie images of the ghostly Alice, returned from the dead to remind us of our own unfulfilled desires.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, Abacus/Sphere Books, London, 1972, p.33.

<sup>2</sup> The best analysis of the dynamics of feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s is Sheila Rowbotham's *Is the Future Female?: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*, Virago Press, London, 1987.