



Directed by Nicolas Roeg
Written by Edward Bond, based on the novel by James Vance Marshall
Produced by Si Litvinoff
Cinematography by Nicola Roeg
Edited by Antony Gibbs, Alan Patillo
Music Composed by John Barry

Jenny Agutter... Girl
Luc Roeg... White Boy (as Lucien John)
David Gulpilil ... Black Boy (as David Gumpilil)
John Meillon... Man
Robert McDarra... Man

NICOLAS ROEG (August 15, 1928, London, England, UK) directed 23 films:
2007 *Puffball: The Devil's Eyeball*, 2000 *The Sound of Claudia Schiffer*, 1996 "Samson and Delilah", 1995 "Full Body Massage", 1995 *Two Deaths*, 1995 *Hotel Paradise*, 1993 "Heart of Darkness", 1993 "The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles", 1991 *Cold Heaven*, 1990 *The Witches*, 1989 "Sweet Bird of Youth", 1988 *Track 29*, 1987 *Aria* (segment "Un ballo in maschera"), 1986 *Castaway*, 1985 *Insignificance*, 1983 *Eureka*, 1980 *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession*, 1976 *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, 1973 *Don't Look Now*, 1972 *Glastonbury Fayre* (documentary), 1971 *Walkabout*, and 1970 *Performance*.

He is also a highly regarded cinematographer. Some of his 20 cinematographer credits are 1972 *Glastonbury Fayre*, 1971 *Walkabout*, 1970 *Performance*, 1968 *Petulia*, 1967 *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 1966 *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, 1966 *Fahrenheit 451*, 1965 *Doctor Zhivago*, and 1960 *Jazz Boat*.

ANTONY GIBBS (October 17, 1925, UK) had edited 50 films, some of which are 2000 *Reindeer Games*, 1998 *Ronin*, 1994 *Don Juan DeMarco*, 1993 *The Man Without a Face*, 1989 *In Country*, 1986 *Tai-Pan*, 1985 *Agnes of God*, 1984 *Dune*, 1980 *The Dogs of War*, 1977 *A Bridge Too Far*, 1976 *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, 1975 *Rollerball*, 1973 *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1971 *Fiddler on the Roof*, 1971 *Walkabout*, 1970 *Performance*, 1968 *Petulia*, 1965 *The Knack... and How to Get It*, 1963 *Tom Jones*, 1962 *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1961 *A Taste of Honey*, and 1960 *Night of Passion*.



JOHN BARRY (November 3, 1933, York, England, UK – January 30, 2011, Oyster Bay, New York) has won four original score Oscars (1991 *Dances with Wolves*, 1986 *Out of Africa*, 1969 *The Lion in Winter*, and 1967 *Born Free*). He also won the 1967 best original song Oscar for "Born Free." Some of the 110 films he scored are 2001 *Enigma*, 1995 *The Scarlet Letter*, 1995 *Cry, the Beloved Country*, 1992 *Chaplin*, 1990 *Dances with Wolves*, 1986 *Peggy Sue Got Married*, 1986 *Howard the Duck*, 1985 *Out of Africa*, 1985 *Jagged Edge*, 1985 *A View to a Kill*, 1984 *The Cotton Club*, 1982 *Frances*, 1982 *Hammett*, 1981 *Body Heat*, 1981 *The Legend of the Lone Ranger*, 1980 *Somewhere in Time*, 1980 *Night Games*, 1979 *Moonraker*, 1979 *Hanover Street*, 1978 *The Betsy*, 1978 *St. Joan*, 1977 *The Deep*, 1976 *King Kong*, 1976 *Robin and Marian*, 1975 *The Day of the Locust*, 1974 *The Man with the Golden Gun*, 1973 *A Doll's House*, 1971 *Diamonds Are Forever*, 1971 *They Might Be Giants*, 1971 *Walkabout*, 1970 *Monte Walsh*, 1969 *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, 1969 *Midnight Cowboy*, 1968 *The Lion in Winter*, 1968 *Petulia*, 1967 *You Only Live Twice*, 1966 *Born Free*, 1965 *Thunderball*, 1965 *King Rat*, 1965 *The Ipcress File*, 1964 *Goldfinger*, 1964 *Zulu*, 1963 *From Russia with Love*, 1962 *Dr. No*, and 1960 *Never Let Go*.

JENNY AGUTTER...Girl (December 20, 1952 in Taunton, Somerset, England, UK) appears in two 2011 films: *Weighed In: The Story of the Mumper*, and *Golden Brown*. She has been in 102 other films and TV programs and series, some of which are 2010 *Burke and Hare*, 2007 *Irina Palm*, 2002-2003 “MI-5”, 1996 “And the Beat Goes On”, 1990 *Darkman*, 1987 *Amazon Women on the Moon*, 1986 “Murder, She Wrote”, 1985 “Magnum, P.I.”, 1978 *China 9, Liberty 37*, 1977 *Equus*, 1976 *The Eagle Has Landed*, 1976 *Logan's Run*, 1971 *Walkabout*, 1969 *I Start Counting*, 1968 *Star!*, 1968 “The Railway Children”, and 1964 *East of Sudan*.

DAVID GULPILIL...Black Boy (as David Gumpilil) (July 1, 1953, Maningrida, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia) has appeared in 28 films, including 2008 *Australia*, 2006 *Ten Canoes*, 2005 *The Proposition*, 2002 *The Tracker*, 2002 *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 2001 *Serenades*, 1991 *Until the End of the World*, 1986 ‘Crocodile’ *Dundee*, 1983 *The Right Stuff*, 1977 *The Last Wave*, 1976 *Storm Boy*, 1974 *Homicide*, and 1971 *Walkabout*.

JOHN MEILLON...Man (May 1, 1934, Mosman, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia – August 11, 1989, Mosman, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia) has appeared in 99 films and TV series, including 1989 *Tripe*, 1988 *Crocodile Dundee II*, 1986 ‘Crocodile’ *Dundee*, 1984 *The Wild Duck*, 1975 *Inn of the Damned*, 1974 *The Dove*, 1971 “Dynasty”, 1971 *Walkabout*, 1970 “Delta”, 1969 “Riptide”, 1965 *Dead Man's Chest*, 1963 *The Devil Inside*, 1962 *Billy Budd*, 1962 *The Longest Day*, and 1959 *On the Beach*.

LUCIEN JOHN...Boy, whose real name is Luc Roeg (he is director Nicolas Roeg’s son) acted only in this film. He has produced 16 films, some of which are ‘2010 *Mr. Nice*, 2008 *New Town Killers*, 2004 *Fat Slags*, 2002 *Spider*, 1995 *Othello*, 1993 *Heart of Darkness* and 1998 *Big Time*.

“Nicolas Roeg,” from *World Film Directors V. II*. Ed. John Wakeman, H.H. Wilson Company, NY, 1988

British director and cinematographer, born in London, son of Jack Roeg and the former Gertrude Silk. He “always wanted to make films” and tried to launch a film society at the Mercers School in London, where he was educated. He entered the army at the very end of the war and served as his unit’s projectionist, a position that allowed him to see “masses of movies.”

In 1947 Roeg went to work at Marylebone Studio in central London, making the tea, helping to dub French films, and learning the rudiments of editing. In 1950 he moved on to MGM’s London studios at Boreham Wood, where he worked as a clapper boy and as an assistant on Joe Rutenburg’s camera crew. He also “used to take stills and do a lot of work on my own at night, just because I was interested in learning about photography.” Roeg spent the 1950s in this way, slowly working his way up through the hierarchy of the camera crew. In 1960 he did some second-unit location work in Australia for Fred Zinnemann’s *The Sundowners* and in the Middle East for David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Roeg received his first credits as director of photography for two undistinguished films by Robert Lynn, *On Information Received* (1961) and *Dr. Crippen* (1962). Two more

interesting assignments with Clive Donner followed—*The Caretaker* (1963) and *Nothing But the Best*—and then Roger Corman’s memorable horror film *The Masque of the Red Death* (1963). Roeg says that Corman “created a feeling that made you want to really astonish him with good stuff...He says what he wants and it’s got to be done, and he makes you somehow want to improve on it.” John Cutts recalled the result “boldly cinematic and full of wonderfully realized effects; I can’t remember when I’ve seen (outside a Minnelli or Cukor film) such a stylized use of color before. Blues, yellows, whites, greens, blacks (notice how red is withheld until the climax)—the film is literally awash in colors. Visually the film is stunning.”

After three routine assignments (of which the most notable was Richard Lester’s *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*) came François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1966)—not among the director’s most successful films but an exciting project for Roeg, who greatly admired Truffaut and thinks that the picture is underestimated. He had similar feelings about his next project, John Schlesinger’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*, which in fact was praised more for Roeg’s “brilliant color illustrations of the lovely countryside” than for its direction. *Petulia* (1968), another Richard Lester movie, and one that acquired a certain cult reputation, was Roeg’s last film as a director of photography for others (though he retained this function in the first two films he directed himself).



Although he had become one of the most admired cinematographers in Britain, Roeg had entered that profession only as a step on the road towards making films of his own. After *Petulia* he decided to wait no longer. He found a story that he wanted to do, James Vance Marshall’s Australian novel *Walkabout*, and persuaded the British dramatist Edward Bond to write the adaptation, then went off to Australia for eight weeks, scouting locations. Roeg could find no one to back the project, however, and it was temporarily shelved. At this point he was approached by Donald Cammell, an old friend, who had an idea for “a film about a gangster in London’s underworld, and the relation of that specific kind of violence to the violence in human nature.” Warner Brothers agreed to finance *Performance* largely because the Rolling Stones’ superstar singer Mick Jagger (a friend of Cammell’s) accepted a major role in it.

In an interview with Tom Milner, Roeg says that *Performance* “was a curious film in that we went on the floor and

the construction came after. That's why Donald and I never separate our contributions. It became like our lives. We went on the floor with an outline, an idea, and about the first three scenes; there wasn't a script; and then two of us were doing all the jobs of writer, director, cameraman; it was perfect. we got together in a mysterious way, just worked night and day, day and night, and it began to live."

Performance is the story of Chas (James Fox), a macho and sadistic young thug who works for a London protection racketeer named Harry Flowers....The film's speculations about identity, roleplaying, and "performance" are expressed or adumbrated in strikingly cinematic terms—in visual puns and echoes, color motifs, and the ubiquitous presence of mirrors. Mirrors are the stock-in-trade of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose story "The Old Man and the Mountain"...is one of the sources of the film's plot....Sanford Lieberson, the producer of *Performance*, says that the film had "a tremendous emotional effect on people intimately concerned with it which couldn't be countered or contained by rational argument." On Warner Brothers, when they eventually saw it, the effect was rather different: they owned a film that—as far as it was comprehensible at all—seemed to be recommending the use of hallucinogenic drugs and several varieties of unorthodox sex. Nevertheless, it starred Mick Jagger, and probably for that reason alone, they finally released the movie, though halfheartedly and with many cuts. Its reception was, to say the least, mixed. Many thought it a corrupt and decadent work; others found it "deeply moral"—a serious exploration of the correlation between sex, violence, and power....

Roeg's next film—and his first as sole director—could scarcely have been more remote from this claustrophobic essay, at least in its settings. *Walkabout* (20th Century-Fox, 1971) begins with a restless fragmented montage expressing the sterility and alienation of life in a great Australian city. A product of this society drives his small son (Lucien John) and a teenage daughter (Jenny Agutter) into the desert for a picnic, and tries to kill them. Failing, he kills himself instead in his burning car. The children in their school uniforms, carrying a portable radio, set off into the wilderness, the girl bravely attempting to hide the truth from her little brother.

It is soon clear that they cannot survive. They have given up the struggle when a young Aboriginal appears (David Gumpilil). He is undergoing a walkabout, a solitary sojourn in the wilderness during which he must rely on tribal lore for survival. Well able to cope with the desert, he befriends the two children, showing them how to find water and supplying them with lizards and other creatures to eat. Together the three set off on a long trek back to civilization. The little boy is fascinated by the Aboriginal and experiments with his language, customs, and skills. The girl, however, is older and more fully a product of her society: aware of her role as his racial superior and aware also of her own coming-of-age, she remains aloof and (as Pauline Kael said) "intoxicatingly prim." Only rarely, as in one beautiful

lyrical scene when she swims naked in a mountain pool, does she seem at one with the magnificent natural world around her. At length, in an abandoned hut close to civilization, the youth performs a tribal courting dance which so terrifies her that she slams the door in his face. Rejected, he has no honorable alternative but death, and hangs himself. The final scenes show the girl years later, a bourgeois wife in a glittering suburban kitchen, haunted by her glimpse of eden, forever lost.

Critics were unanimous in their praise for the beauty of Roeg's wilderness photography but not in their comments on his use of such devices as superimposition (in a gorgeous montage of desert sunsets used to indicate the passage of time) and freeze frames. The latter are employed to draw attention to the naturalness of the Aboriginal's spearing of a kangaroo for food and then to underscore the mindless brutality of a white man who is shown gunning down wild animals from a jeep. Effective as these scenes are, some thought that Roeg had allowed his technique to become too intrusive, and that this, coupled with an

almost total lack of character development and some special pleading in the nature-versus-civilization argument, left the viewer uncommitted. The picture was not much noticed when it first appeared but like its predecessor has since become a cult movie.

...Allusions to literature, art, and the cinema abound in Roeg's work....In *Don't Look Now* (1973)



Pauline Kael wrote that in this film Roeg "employs fast, almost subliminal imagery. . . . The unnerving cold ominousness that he imparts to the environment says that things are not what they seem, and one may come out of the theater still seeing shock cuts and feeling slightly disassociated." She goes on to call the picture "a masterpiece" but "also trash," saying that "Roeg's vision is as impersonal and noncommittal as Warhol's, but with the gloss and craftsmanship of Losey."... One critic called *Don't Look Now* the most subtle and sophisticated horror film ever made," and there were comparisons with Hitchcock. David Robinson wrote that the movie established Roeg "as the outstanding talent to have emerged in British cinema in at least the past decade."

Among the claims to distinction of his next film is the fact that it was filmed in the United States with British money. *The Man who Fell to Earth* (British Lion, 1976), centers on "Thomas Newton" (David Bowie), who comes to earth in search of succor for his drought-stricken planet....The relatively straightforward story is given a far from straightforward telling. It goes forward, as Roeg says, "in fits and starts," and we are presented not with a coherent narrative but with something closer to a series of isolated scenes whose significance we have to interpret as best we may....

In *Bad Timing* Roeg chose for the third time as his star a hero of popular music. Dr. Alex Linden (Art Garfunkel) is an American psychoanalyst teaching at the University of Vienna, in the shadow of his master Freud. He has a love affair with another expatriate, Milena (Theresa Russell), whose marriage has failed....*Bad Timing* is a bleak commentary on the nature of love

and a difficult, often dizzying film, but most critics found it visually and intellectually exhilarating as well. “Like all great movies,” wrote Nigel Andrews, “*Bad Timing* combines the particular and the general; bruising one with the closeness of its own reality but also setting echoes sounding in the brain of larger truths.” It stole the show at the Berlin Film Festival, where it was screened out of competition, and a few months later had “already started to become a legend.”...with *Eureka* (1983) Roeg turned to a historical incident as the basis for a cosmic thriller....After *Eureka*, Roeg decided he wanted to “go in the diametrically opposite direction,” and this he did, to a certain extent, with *Insignificance* (1985), an adaptation of a Terry Johnson play. Where *Eureka* was cast in the epic mode of Greek tragedy, *Insignificance* (as the title suggests) takes an anecdotal approach....According to Roeg, he was drawn to Johnson’s play by underlying themes—identity, time, relationships, fame, even the future of the world. “We must have a sense of something greater than ourselves. We must have another kind of belief, not a belief in our own practicality and what we know. That’s what I like about the title of the piece: the idea that the world, society, has very little sense of a mystical movement of things. What it means is not that ‘it’s all insignificant,’ but that nothing has more significance than anything else.”

Charles Champlin writes that, as a director, Roeg “remains an extraordinary creator of images, an impressionist filmmaker whose work can generate hypnotic powers. Like Ken Russell, he has occasionally seemed entranced by his own visual energy,” but he appears to be moving towards a more disciplined matching of form and content, without sacrificing anything of the provocative and personal signature which is earning him an *auteur*’s following.”

Roeg seldom provides us with protagonists that we can comfortably identify with. He deliberately “plays with film grammar” and denies us “the crutch of time” in movies that go “in fits and starts.” His work is full of “perceptual assaults” and his elliptical editing suppresses transitions and withholds narrative information and value judgments, forcing us to ponder, speculate and reassess what we are taking for granted. “Of course I could make a film in the realist tradition,” he told Brian Baxter, but, Roeg explains, “it would not be me and I could only do it once. People would see through it.”

Like Alex Linden, Roeg is said to be unnervingly percipient about the people around him, so that “actors and others feel naked in front of his observations.” He himself is elusive, and puts up “a constant smokescreen of manners, humor and outrage for anyone who tried to put a finger on his own personality.” Asked to contribute a statement to this volume, he responded: “I feel very strongly that every thought about the past, even in documentary detail, destroys the imagined or real facts about the present and certainly about the future of any human being. It has always been my opinion that, in order to know something about an artist (or indeed anybody) it is better to build up one’s own picture from other people and odd snippets of biography and then come to some personal conclusion. I think the artist can’t help but use his own imagination and dreams of the things he might wish to have been or probably become. I am sure everyone’s sense of self-invention becomes so real to them that they must believe in it, and that this applies both to very

straightforward historical detail and also to the hopes and desires, rethought, of the past.” Roeg’s feature films have not made him rich, and he supplements his income by making television commercials.



from *Nicholas Roeg Film By Film Scott Salwolke. McFarland & Co, Jefferson N.C. & London, 1993*

Nicholas Roeg has taken risks with his films that few other directors have taken and he has paid a price for this decision. Although he has directed some of the most innovative films of the past quarter century, he remains an anonymous figure, seldom mentioned in most histories of film. He has yet to have a major commercial success, and critics have always been divided about his work. . . .

On the basis of a dozen films Roeg’s place in history should be assured. he combines the British film industry’s past with the innovations brought forth by the French New Wave. His work often echoes the films of Britain’s most famous directors; scenes from his films borrow directly from the works of Alfred Hitchcock, Carol Reed, and Richard Lester. In their color scheme and in their presentation of themes, his films most recall the works of Michael Powell and like Powell’s films, Roeg’s films were often neglected on release only to be reexamined more favorably at a later date. Roeg’s editing and battles with censorship are the direct result of his fascination with French films, particularly those of Alain Resnais....

He has held to the belief that film is not just a commercial medium, but also an art form. He says, “I believe film is an art. I believe it. I truly believe that. Thought can be transferred by the juxtaposition of images, and you mustn’t be afraid of an audience not understanding. You can say things visually, immediately, and that’s where film, I believe, is going. It’s not a pictorial example of a published work. It’s a transference of thought.”

... Roeg . . . often remains as inaccessible as many find his films. He does not make the traditional rounds of the media when a film is released because he believes a film should stand on its own. An intensely private man, he has given few details of his personal life and, with the exception of a handful of interviews, has told little of his early life. One can often see Roeg, however, in the characters in his films, and he has described this relationship between his own life and his directing:

With film, certainly the way I approach it, one has to delve into one's life to put "truth" onto the screen. One delves into one's emotions and tries to translate that to the story one wants to tell. All our imagination is bound by experience. And when all that is ultimately portrayed in the characters of the film, it becomes a melancholic affair....

I don't believe my films are inaccessible. If they were, I would be inaccessible myself. What I am trying to do, like anyone who works in any form of art, is to express an emotion. The film audience is so curiously demanding in conservatism. People never say of dance or theater, "I don't understand what is happening." Yet film is the newest and should be the freest of all....

I am concerned with breaking barriers, challenging assumptions, and moving the possibilities of film on a bit. Part of my job is to show that the cinema is the art of our time and can break through previous terms of reference. That doesn't mean ignoring them so much as expanding them as far as possible. Usually producers read scripts, and they want something rooted in the reality they know. I'm more anxious to look for what we don't know.

Roeg remains disappointed that his films have not received the acceptance that they deserve or that he desires. "As I've said before, all I hope from my work is that someone out there will say, 'Hey, I've got a sort of curious, twisted mind like yours, so I know what you're talking about.' That's all we're doing with our work anyhow is saying, 'Hey, is anybody out there?' That's all we're doing with our lives, really. 'Is there anybody out there who understands me?'"

Walkabout

James Vance Marshall's novella *Walkabout* has become something of a children's classic, particularly in Australia, where the story is set. It concerns two children who survive a plane crash but then must travel through the outback to return to civilization. Near death, they are saved by an aboriginal boy engaged in a walkabout, his society's test of manhood. The young brother begins to develop a relationship with the aborigine, even learning some of his language, but the girl grows fearful of him and interprets his actions as a sexual threat. Seeing her fear, the aborigine mistakes it for an ability to sense his death. As if resigned to his supposed fate, he gradually grows weaker, eventually willing himself to die. Alone again, the children continue and at last meet up with a group of aborigines. Changed by her encounter, the girl seems more willing to accept these aborigines and even attempts to communicate with them. She draws a picture of a house, and the aborigines react by gesturing that just such a structure is only a short distance away. Thus as the children walk off, they are presumably about to be saved.



It is hard to see why the book *Walkabout* deserves its reputation as a classic. The children come across as racist, and Marshall's tone seems to encourage this attitude. He creates the perfect Noble Savage, providing us with details of his life, but not of his personality. Roeg had long been enamored of the story, and of

Edward Bond's script, however, which, though sparse, provided much with which Roeg could work. It was not the visual potential which attracted him, but the central conflict:

"It was that here were two people—two people in effect, since the little boy really acts as a chorus to the aborigine and the girl—who by this curious moment of fate were at a point where they could have been in love with each other.

They had everything to offer each other, but they couldn't communicate and went zooming to their own separate destinies, through the odd placement of identity, the identity that other people had put on them."

One alteration in the film was not due to a script change, but to natural aging. Jenny Agutter had been thirteen when Roeg first chose her for the part but was sixteen when filming actually started; her age helped to accentuate the sexuality of the story. The aborigine would be played by David Gumpilil, who knew no English. Roeg would communicate to the actor primarily through sign language. (It would not be the last time that Roeg used an actor who spoke no English; he often cast such actors because the confusion they conveyed added something to their role. The most striking example would be Renato Scarpa, cast as the inspector in *Don't Look Now*.) For the part of the boy, Roeg looked no further than his own family, picking his son Luc to play the role....

"In Australia when an aborigine man child reaches 16 he is sent out into the land. For months he must live from it. Sleep on it. Eat of its fruit and flesh. Stay alive. Even if it means killing his fellow creatures. The aborigine calls it the walkabout. This is the story of a walkabout."

This introduction does not serve as a definition to the film, it alerts us to the thematic paradigms of the film. Three children are sent into the outback, one by choice, the others by tragedy, but for all three it is a test of sorts. For Roeg the central question is not survival, but the interaction of characters whose responses have been conditioned by society. He has called the film a documentary and his subject is the juxtaposition of two cultures; the editing juxtaposes an event in the city to a similar act in the outback and vice versa. The opening immediately indicates the dichotomy of the city and the desert. The camera pans across a brick wall to reveal the city; later the camera will again pan across the wall, this time to reveal the desert.

The focus is not on the main characters, but on their daily routine. They are not even named, so that we identify them by their roles instead of their personalities: the father, the boy, the girl, and the aborigine. The opening montage does not delineate their characters, but shows instead how their environment dominates them. The father is anonymous among the other businessmen, as is the girl in her own setting: her

school uniform unites her with her classmates...Of the family, only the boy shows signs of individuality, as he interacts with his fellow students or attempts to communicate with his father. ...

In *Walkabout* we see for the first time Roeg's use of another medium to act as commentator on the action. He explains this technique by saying

"I'm interested in the split senses engaging people's attention on more than one surface at a time. There'd be more of this in the coming generations." Already people watch television and read a magazine at the same time, looking from one to the other. Kids are accustomed to doing two or three things at a time now. This is what I was trying to put into *Walkabout*."

...Bond [the screenwriter] suggests what can cause an individual to turn to violence: "We respond aggressively when we are constantly deprived of our physical and emotional needs, or when we are threatened with this; and I we are constantly deprived and threatened in this way—as human beings now are—we live in a constant state

of aggression. It does not matter how much a man doing routine work in, say, a factory or office is paid: he will still be deprived in this sense. Because he is behaving in a way for which he is not designed, he is alienated from his natural self, and this will have physical and emotional consequences for him. He becomes nervous and tense and he begins to look for threats everywhere. This makes him belligerent and provocative; he becomes a threat to other people, and so his situation rapidly deteriorates."

Although most critics have taken the father's actions to be murderous, it could also be contended that his intentions are to save his children, not to kill them. Knowing what society has done to him, he forces his children out into the outback on his own form of walkabout. ...

Roeg's analysis of the film seems to concur with this theory: "The story offers an opportunity to start afresh—even explode the burden of manners to a degree to put on a new footing the relationship between men and women of the same or different color or social background. All of these differences might stem from a whole history of the world that has been misunderstood. We must start again, not from sophistication but from total innocence."

...Roeg is one of the few commercial filmmakers who consciously experiment with film grammar in presenting their stories; he does this particularly in his early films. It is most evident in his editing style, but it can also be seen in his use of techniques that break with the traditional rules of cinema. In *Performance* his experimentation was evident in his use of black and white, in his imbuing some sequences with a particular color, and in the exchange of characters without warning or apparent reason. In *Walkabout*, it can be seen in the inclusion of still photographs in three sequences of the film. ...

Walkabout is indeed one of Roeg's most accessible films in terms of plot. In terms of themes and motifs, however, it is one of his most intricate. If *Performance* introduced many of Roeg's most persistent themes, *Walkabout* serves notice of his

more lyrical side. It is also his first film in which the focus is on a female protagonist. The pointed obscurity of many seemingly crucial plot elements would also run through Roeg's work. Although he found *Walkabout* flawed, John Russell Taylor considered it a "curiously haunting film, with moments of real power when myth seems to take on flesh and be reenacted convincingly before our eyes. The attempt is on a grand scale, and if it does not always succeed there is still enough there to make it much more worth seeing than many a modest, moderate success, and to give us very high hopes for Mr. Roeg's subsequent work."



Justine Kelly, "Walkabout," Senses of Cinema, 2001.

Walkabout (1970) is a haunting film, set in a fading but spectacular world - ancient Australia. Sparse in dialogue, immersed in an ancient landscape with a reptile, insect population and chocker-block full of innocence and sexual tension. A Hollywood synopsis would talk about a journey of inner growth, coming of age or

that concept of the moment, 'survival'. The survival of the white protagonists and the fate that awaits the Aborigine at the end of this journey is a forewarning of an encroachment upon Aboriginal culture and its wisdom of the ancient continent. Years after first seeing *Walkabout* in my childhood home (in South Australia, where the bottom of the rocky Flinders Ranges meets the swampy top point of the Spencer Gulf), on a stinky fly-blown Sunday afternoon (such films were only ever shown when the cricket had been washed), I found myself seeing it again in Sydney's Chauvel cinema on a freezing Sunday evening. What a surprise to realise that the film was directed and shot by an English man, Nicolas Roeg.

Where I come from, in the '70s, national pride remained something unspoken of. What made rural Australians special was the land we lived on and its rugged beauty rather than our history or our culture. When the land flourished, we flourished. When the land showed her temper and brought droughts and floods, we were cursed like a parent punishing a child for misdeeds and yet stood in awe of her power. We always felt very small in comparison to the land. And yet we loved her. She was all that made us unique and all that 5 generations of my family knew of the world.

We also felt small, young and in the shadow of other cultures. We spoke about our inadequacies in comparison to Europe or America. And the cinema was essentially Hollywood: glamorous and familiar characters in neat, familiar situations. They seemed too exciting for Australians to compete with. I adored old Hollywood movies as a kid and grew up on English comedy. The problem was not their perspectives on the world but a lack of confidence in Australian perspectives. We were taught to look abroad for culture. At that time, I didn't even know Australian film existed.

A sister (Jenny Agutter) of about 16 years of age and brother (Lucien John) about 5, survive the suicide of their father. Roeg

never gives us the story of the father's suicide step by step; instead, he gives us images of an organized, lush, watery Sydney while the didgeridoo music echoes through the bitumen streets and concrete towers. The father watches his children swim in the harbour side pool and the next thing we know we're in the desert.

So the sister and brother are abandoned in the middle of the Australian desert, and walk and walk in the blinding sun, as the earth cracks around them, lizards feed and squawking crows circle above their heads. When all seems lost, the Aborigine (David Gupilil) appears at the top of the sand dune as a black dot. He bounds down the sand dune where the sister and brother had stumbled and stands smiling in front of them. He is glowing charcoal, long and lithe. He looks cool; he belongs here. The sister surveys the dead lizards hanging around his waist, covering his genitals. At first he has no curiosity for the strangers. The sister chases him, "Water, water. This is Australia. Don't you speak English?" She looks at him as if he is the ignorant one.

So they go walkabout with the Aborigine for what must be months but, just like the characters, we are unable to gauge time. In a way the film marks the movement from conventional 'white' urban society to Australia's outback by creating this feeling of timelessness (the meaning of 'time' in the traditional Western sense is lost), or through abstracting time and taking on an eerie, eternal feeling of time and being. The brother immediately takes the Aborigine on as a surrogate brother or father figure and learns to communicate with him and to see the desert as a giant playground. Meanwhile, the sister is trying to maintain standards and dignity, washing her clothes and covering her body.

Walkabout is still striking today but must have been remarkably bold in the climate of its time - contrasting Aboriginal and Western perspectives on an equal plane. Australian writers and filmmakers have rarely embraced how full of life the outback is.

During my childhood in the '70s in rural South Australia when the Aborigines came into town in their old bombs for a footy match or a drink, they scared us with their lithe way of moving, their lack of words and their seemingly secretive smiles. That I had loved this strange, unknown film that nobody else bothered watching - well I'd just never mention it. And when I ventured into the rocky creek beds to play, I had imaginary Aboriginal friends; one always standing on the rocks with one leg bent, the other straight and leaning on his long stick—a silhouette amongst the scrawny mallee gums in the red sunset.

Walkabout contrasts the abundant reptile, bird, insect life with the traffic buzz of the city; the transistor radio, blasting out useless educational programs, with the rock paintings the Aborigine paints, that the sister and brother can't make head or

tails of; and the story telling of the little brother with newspaper pages flicking across the screen. It contrasts the sleazy oozing of meteorologists (working on some sort of desk on a salt lake) at a flash of flesh from their female colleague with the chivalry and innocence of the Aboriginal boy looking at the sister, trying to tell her something. There are moments when the Aborigine looks her in the eye and speaks to her softly in his language. There are no attempts to translate what he says but you get the feeling he is making some offer of love. At one time in the night they look at each other. He sits up and speaks to her and then walks away to stand upright, leaning on his stick on a rock all night.

There are such images throughout *Walkabout*—the Aborigine standing on a rock at sunset, his bouncing as he mimics the movement of the kangaroo until she is cornered and shakes, his cutting open of meat for cooking with sharp wacks of a stick; or a lizard eating a smaller lizard or simply panning a



long rock face - that can't be scripted. The project obviously was shot with spontaneity and decadence. Its strong simple story is interwoven with elliptical, semi-documentary still shots of life in the desert and portraits of our beautiful characters.

The Aborigine delivers the sister and brother to the edge of

Western civilization—an abandoned farmhouse. He looks at the sister like a woman. He seems to think that here she will be happy—all he wants to do is make her happy. Instead, she orders him around like servant. She tells him to fetch "water" and he utters his first and only English words of the film, "water", in reply. But he utters them with bitterness and we first notice the dark approaching shadow on the once glowing face that bounded down the sand dunes that day.

The Aborigine sees Aboriginal children making ceramic statues of 'kangaroos' and 'tribal elders' (presumably for tourists). He is bowled over whilst hunting on foot with his traditional spears by a truck full of aggressive shooters. What follows is a remarkable series of images and sounds that emphasize the wasteful, blunt and violent destruction of the Aborigine's life source—the wildlife. It is strikingly edited with jump cuts and surreal sounds so that we are not sure whether it is happening in the film's real time or as a collage of memories or as a premonition of the future. The scene ends as the blood drains out of a buffalo. The Aborigine does not want to belong to this approaching world.

For me, the Aborigine's motives are what takes me back to this film again and again. Why doesn't he look for his people? Why does he help the strangers? Does he love the sister and why? Or does he just have a pure heart as beautiful as his innocent smile? How much does he know of the encroaching civilization? What does he say as he looks into the sister's eyes

and mumbles in his soft rolling tongue?

Without giving away the final twists of the sister and brother's return to white civilization, *Walkabout* ends years later in Sydney. The sister is married and living in the same apartment where her tragic parents once resided. She slices her meat and looks out over Sydney harbour, dreaming of what could have been, of her times swimming carefree and laughing in a

billabong with her Aboriginal. Then as her frail husband in a suit comes home and tells her of his promotion and salary rise we can share her emptiness and restlessness. Caged in by cement, dependent on gadgets and involved in relationships based on appearance and politeness. She doesn't just think there must be another way; she actually has passed it up.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXII:

Mar 8 John Mackenzie **THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY** 1980
 Mar 22 Bertrand Tavernier **COUP DE TORCHON/CLEAN SLATE** 1981
 Mar 29 Werner Herzog **FITZCARRALDO** 1982
 Apr 5 Nagisa Ôshima **MERRY CHRISTMAS MR. LAWRENCE** 1983
 Apr 12 Stephen Frears **THE GRIFTERS** 1990
 Apr 19 Jafar Panahi **DAYEREH/THE CIRCLE** 2000
 Apr 26 Ridley Scott **BLADE RUNNER** 1982



“AMERICAN CHARTRES”: BUFFALO’S WATERFRONT ELEVATORS: EXHIBIT EXTENDED TO MAY 1

The closing date of Bruce’s photograph exhibit of the grain elevators on Buffalo River, the City Ship Canal and Lake Erie, now on display at the UB Anderson Gallery, has been changed from March 6 to May 1. The Gallery is open Wednesday-Saturday 11AM-5PM and Sunday 1-5PM. Admission is free. For more information go to <http://www.ubartgalleries.org/#?select=events>.

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto_list@buffalofilmseminars.com

...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center
 and State University of New York at Buffalo
 with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News.