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To cite this article: Timothy Laurie (2024) The Boy Who Looks: Previewing Masculinities and Violence Through Boyhoods on Screen, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 39:119-120, 82-97, DOI: [10.1080/08164649.2025.2454231](https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2025.2454231)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2025.2454231>



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Published online: 23 Jan 2025.



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The Boy Who Looks: Previewing Masculinities and Violence Through Boyhoods on Screen

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of boy witnesses in screen representations of domestic and family violence. Australian cinema has frequently placed a speechless boy at a scene of men's violence: he might be a figure of innocence against masculinities gone bad, or a proxy for the audience, simulating a point-of-view untroubled by contemporary debates around gender-based violence. This article argues that the figure of the boy who looks is invested with multiple competing meanings attached to masculinity, including idealisations of boyhood curiosity, celebrations of boys as figures of progress, and the racialisation of Australian boyhoods within the context of colonial violence and dispossession. Furthermore, by interrogating the trope of the boy who looks, this article considers the affordances and limitations of contemporary feminist approaches to violence in cinema, and argues for an understanding of domestic and family violence in cinema as inextricably linked to the ways that we think about masculinity, cultural identity, and youth.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 January 2024
Accepted 11 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Masculinities; boyhoods;
gender; film studies;
witnessing; family violence

Introduction

The boy sneaks a look around a bedroom door. Or he tiptoes up to a crack in the fence, a half-opened window, a gap in the bushes. A man commits an act of violence but the boy does nothing: he just looks.

Boys have long been looking at the violence of men on screen. From Hollywood dramas like *Witness* (Weir 1985) and *Boyhood* (Linklater 2014), to a recent cycle of Australian dramas such as *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Kurzel 2019) and *High Ground* (Johnson 2020), the scene of the *boy who looks* has become a familiar motif. The camera pans or zooms into a close-up, the background *mise-en-scène* recedes around an unmoving face, and the watching boy remains speechless. In *Witness* (Weir 1985),¹ the young Samuel peers through a crack in a cubical door of a Philadelphia bathroom and witnesses a stranger being murdered. Amish elder Eli later offers counsel to Samuel:

Samuel: I would only kill a bad man.

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Eli: Only a bad man. I see. And you know these bad men on sight? You are able to look into their hearts and see this badness?

Samuel: I can see what they do.

Like the intuitions of most boys who look at men's violence in cinema, Samuel's intuitions turn out to be correct. The boy who looks is the truth-keeper of the film: he obtains sudden moral clarity around violence – looking into their hearts, seeing this badness – that transcends the partial perspectives of adult characters (see Ahlberg 2002).

The shot of the boy who looks, coupled with the reverse shot of what he sees, creates an instance of what Carol J. Clover has described, in her classic 1992 study of horror cinema *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, as the 'reactive gaze' (2015, 191–205). This point-of-view shot expresses vulnerability in relation to the thing looked at, and is therefore the obverse of the 'male gaze' theorised by Laura Mulvey (1975), which seeks to secure dominance over the thing. But the reactive gaze of the boy also performs narrative work beyond the scene of looking. As future adults, boys are often imagined as potential perpetrators of violence (see Kean and Steains 2022). The cinematic power of the reactive gaze can therefore play upon collective anxieties about the formative influences on boys: will these boys grow up to mimic the acts of violence they witness?

This article considers the ways that boys function as witnesses, truth-keepers, and potential perpetrators of violence, with a particular focus on scenes of witnessing around domestic and family violence (DFV hereafter). I begin with four films from the Australian context: *Australian Rules* (Goldman 2002), *Romulus, My Father* (Roxburgh 2007), *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Kurzel 2019), and *The Dry* (Connolly 2020). These are not films widely promoted or discussed as being about DFV, but they join a host of others from the last two decades that stage boys' responses to men's violence, including *Animal Kingdom* (Michöd 2010), *Toomelah* (Sen 2011), *Snowtown* (Kurzel 2011), and *Nitram* (Kurzel 2021). I consider these initial four examples both as illustrations of a distinct Australian paradigm around men and violence on screen, and as attempts to narrate violence through the perspective of an inquisitive child that, by way of key examples from boys in Hollywood, I label the Curious Boy. The recurrence of Curious Boys across these films provides an opportunity to consider how collective anxieties about men's violence inform the hopes and worries that attach to Australian boyhoods. At the same time, by telling stories that prioritise boy witnesses over the perspectives of female characters, such films can narrow wider social and institutional questions around the prevalence of DFV to a moral relation that exists exclusively between good men and bad men (see Waling 2019). The article therefore argues for a conceptual distinction between the 'male gaze', as the assaultive and projective gaze theorised by Mulvey, and 'looking between men', as a shorthand for looking relations that may allow for male vulnerability, but that prioritise the agency of men over women in screen storytelling.

After examining key instances of looking between men, the final part of this article considers the reactive gaze as a moment of excess beyond the narrative diegesis. Scenes of looking *while not acting* can give rise to speculation about the consequences of inaction: when confronted with violence, what would happen if nobody did anything at all? To show how the reactive gaze can invite such speculations, I consider a scene of a young Yolngu boy looking at colonial violence in Australian film *High Ground* (Johnson 2020).

Looking at Boys Looking at Violence

Australian film audiences frequently find themselves looking at violence. In fact, violence has become a central component of what Jonathan Rayner (2011, 92) has identified as ‘the Australian Gothic’s exploration of iniquitous authority and its repeated depiction of brutal and uncompromising masculinity’. The ‘Australianness’ of Australian cinema is recognisable, at least to some audiences, through its willingness to engage directly and un sentimentally with the everyday violence of men (see Laurie 2021, 72). But while Australian film violence is most often understood through the lens of genre or the contextual work of *mise-en-scène* (e.g. Gildersleeve and Cantrell 2022; Rayner 2022), less attention has been paid to the implied position of the witnesses to violence. I therefore want to consider examples of the boy who looks as a detachable trope of witnessing that exists at the level of the scene, and that generates what Adrian Martin (2020, 31) calls a ‘privileged moment’. The privileged moment may perform functions within its immediate narrative context, but it also connects to and draws power from resemblances with similar scenes in other films. In this way, the scene of looking can be read not simply as one piece of information in a unique story setting, but as a visual trope that builds upon previous moments of boyhood witnessing. In this section, I consider the homologous construction of these privileged moments across three scenes of boys looking at violence perpetrated by men: *Australian Rules* (Goldman 2002), *Romulus, My Father* (Roxburgh 2007), and *True History of the Kelly Kang* (Kurzel 2019). Later, I will consider how the reactive gaze staged in these films is repurposed in a slightly more recent Australian film, *The Dry* (Connolly 2020).

Australian Rules (Goldman 2002) is based on Phillip Gwynne’s teen fiction novel *Deadly, Unna?* (1998). Bob is father to young white Australian footballer Gary, and brutalises Gary’s mother, Liz. In an early sequence, the camera pans from an out-of-focus background to a close-up of Gary’s face in profile, in a mirror of Norman Bates’ peephole shot in *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960). This time, the camera cuts to a peephole in the form of a frosted circular window that obscures but does not hide Bob sexually assaulting Liz. The point-of-view shot only slowly comes into focus, indicating Gary’s own reluctance to witness clearly the scene at hand. Siblings in tow, he slowly climbs out the window and hides in the chicken yard. Later in *Australian Rules*, Bob catches Gary’s best friend, Indigenous footballer Dumby, in a low-key burglary gone wrong. At the sound of a shot from Bob’s gun, the camera cuts to Gary’s response: his face is blank, he does not cry out, and he does nothing.

The refrain of the silent boy witness to family violence in *Australian Rules* is reproduced in *Romulus, My Father* (Roxburgh 2007, *Romulus* hereafter), Richard Roxburgh’s adaptation of Raimond Gaita’s 1998 memoir. Set in the post-World War 2 period, the young Rai grows up in a Romanian family recently migrated from Yugoslavia to Australia. Early in the film, he regularly witnesses fights between his father, Romulus, and mother, Christine. Later, through a crack in a ten shed, Rai watches Christine first kissing, and then being sexually assaulted by, an unknown man. Shot-reverse-shot, the camera cuts between the assault and Rai’s moving eye. The boy flees the scene and the camera cuts to Rai on a bench, silently cradling his younger sibling. Afterwards, Rai returns home to witness, through an open window, his mother being violently punished by the lover with whom she had been having an affair, Mitru. Rai cries out this time and clenches his fist, but when Mitru emerges from the house, the boy is again unable to speak.

In a third variation on the trope of the boy who looks, Justin Kurzel's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2019, *True History* hereafter), adapted from Peter Carey's 2000 novel of the same name, begins with a primal scene that introduces a central conflict between Irish and English settlers in colonial Australia. After the opening chapter signage 'boy', a young Irish Ned approaches a level gap in a tin shed. He sees his mother Ellen in sexual relations with a predatory local English sergeant. The sharp framing of Ned's captive eyes, against the ruffled movement of the camera around the sergeant, follows the equivalent scene in *Romulus* – that is, until the sergeant meets Ned's gaze. *I see you watching me*, his eyes seem to say. This tense encounter lays the groundwork for later retribution against the British by the adult Bushranger Ned.

There is a homology between these privileged moments of looking across *Australian Rules*, *Romulus*, and *True History*. Each film reproduces the structure of the aforementioned bathroom sequence from *Witness* (Weir 1985): there is a crack in a barrier, an unblinking eye held steady by the camera, and a boy who is unable to speak or act. The viewer is inserted into the point-of-view of the boy who looks, but the scene of the violence is either partial (*True History*, *Romulus*) or out-of-focus (*Australian Rules*). The only clear image is the frozen face of the boy himself.

The scene of the boy who looks is open to at least three distinct readings. The first is a reading on face value: the boy who looks is an innocent observer who is shocked by what he sees, and his internal experience is written in the features of his speechless, reactive gaze. On this reading, the reactive gaze itself is enabling for a certain kind of cinematic looking that departs from the plausibly voyeuristic forms of the gaze found elsewhere in screen representations of violence. On a second reading, scene of the boy is a function of a special kind of boy character: the highly inquisitive or curious boy that populates much of Hollywood cinema, and that has been reworked for Australian contexts. The third reading connects the present to the future through distinct cinematic chronotope: the boy who looks without acting *now* is a boy who will take action *later*. The scene of looking portends a variety of possible futures, and our understanding of these futures relates to ideas about good and bad masculinities. In the following section, I want to consider the chronotope of the future boy as man, but before doing so, I want to consider the narrative affordances of the reactive gaze.

The boy who looks has no control over the action that he witnesses: he can only react. Carol J. Clover's concept of the reactive gaze (2015, 191–205) is useful for understanding the vulnerability of the boy in this moment. Unlike the assaultive male gaze theorised by Laura Mulvey (1975), which seeks to project its desires upon and dominate its object, the reactive gaze is dominated by its object. Taking as a key example Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), Clover considers ways that eyes can be figuratively – and sometimes, quite literally – wounded by what they see. Similarly, Zoe Sofia (1989, 118) has argued that even in moments of predation, the point-of-view shot can still invite a sense of fracture, instability, or suppressed vulnerability. The theme of *suppression* is pertinent here: in the films discussed thus far, the interior experience of the boy is not expressly communicated through the reactive gaze. The face of the boy who looks is not accompanied by wincing or crying, and these scenes are not accompanied by soundtracks or scores that would invite a determinate affective register. Instead, the *pathos* of the reactive gaze involves a complex connection between the frozen face of the boy, and what the audience

knows about the situation for that boy character.² But without these affective cues, what is the purpose of the reactive gaze?

The child's point-of-view may function to displace the moral discomfort associated with the predatory or voyeuristic gaze in relation to violence (see Rothman 2013, 42; Sontag 2004, 23). In particular, scenes of domestic and family violence that might otherwise have been received as exploitative acquire a renewed sense of authenticity: this violence, at this moment, for this child. But we must also be cautious not to overstate the extent to which filmmakers worry about voyeurism. After all, there are many Australian films that depict extreme violence in graphic detail and that have received both critical praise and commercial success, such as *Wolf Creek* (McLean 2005) and Justin Kurzel's own *Snowtown* (2011). The possibility of audience discomfort around voyeurism may be one among several creative considerations, but it does not explain the repeated use of boy characters who look and do not speak, and the discomfort with voyeurism is simply not consistent enough to be characterised as a pattern in Australian cinema.

We might consider instead the work performed by the reactive gaze in centring the experience of the boy child. *Romulus*, *Australian Rules*, and *True History* are not films about male perpetrators or female victim survivors; rather, these are films about boyhoods and about the futures of these boys. Scenes of violence, and all other significant narrative events, are introduced and interpreted exclusively through their relevance to boys. Correspondingly, policing practices and institutional responses to DFV are positioned as tangential to the moral reckoning for the boys (and men) placed at the centre of each narrative. This is consistent with the observation made by Diane Shoos (2017, 5) that family violence in Hollywood cinema is represented almost ubiquitously as 'a private matter, a problem of the individual solved by personal agency rather than an issue of the larger society that must be addressed through collective political action aimed at systemic change' (158).³ Later in this article, I will suggest that the priority accorded to the agency of individual boys and men in stories about DFV can be linked to a particular kind of looking relation between men, but here I want to focus on the ways that the experience of the boy is centred in these narratives. What does the reactive gaze do for the characterisation of these boys as witnesses? One answer is that the reactive gaze builds on a character trait that has become a hallmark for the boy in Hollywood: curiosity.

The Curious Boy and the Future

The Curious Boy is tasked with looking at the world of adults as if it were absolutely peculiar. 'As point-of-view characters,' writes Rjurik Davidson, 'children reawaken that sense of estrangement within the viewer or reader. We are asked to participate in events, as if we were seeing or experiencing them for the first time' (Davidson 2007, 31). Although girl characters can also be used in this way, boy characters are particularly valorised in Anglo-American cinema through their perceived capacity to pursue adventure, creativity, and play, and to be unbridled by the vicissitudes of adult social life (see Pomerance and Gateward 2005). An early Curious Boy archetype is three-year-old Barry from Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg 1977). Having been abducted by aliens, Barry is the sole character of the film who remains simply and quietly curious about the arrival of extraterrestrials. Flinging open the

kitchen door to a blast of reddened lights, Barry is happy just to look. Since *Close Encounters*, versions of the Curious Boy have frequently populated Hollywood blockbusters from Spielberg and his peers: Elliott in *E.T.* (Spielberg 1982), Daniel in *The Karate Kid* (Avildsen 1984), Mikey and his friends in *The Goonies* (Donner 1985), Kevin in *Home Alone* (Columbus 1990), Anakin in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (Lucas 1999), and David in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg 2001). Despite variations in the moods and contexts attached to these boys, they share the capacity to see what others cannot.

The Curious Boy is sometimes represented through a mawkish lens of untroubled childhood innocence, but this is not necessarily the case. Adrian Schober (2016, 1–2) notes that Spielbergian children are often unsettled by family life or wider social upheavals. In some cases, the stereotypical depiction boys as energetic and playful is even eclipsed by the oppressive spectre of social conflicts. Commenting on post-WWII Italian neorealist films, Judith Keene (2016, 97) notes that in ‘a great many movies the child witness functions as a moral weather vane pointing the direction of the future, or serving as the symbolic bridge between the present and the past, whether to indicate that something better awaits, or that a bleak future looms’. In Hollywood, we might consider Vern and his friends in *Stand By Me* (Reiner 1986), Cole in *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan 1999), or the young Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005) as moral seers standing on the precipice of entry into flawed but redeemable societies. But the most striking example is the opening prologue to John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), an influential New Black Realist film organised around the childhood and adolescence of African American ten-year-old Tre Stiles.⁴ While friends bicker, Tre stares mute at the debris of a back-alley murder, and on the walls of his school classroom, pictures of the neighbourhood are populated with illustrations of helicopters and African American men surrendering to police. While walking home, Tre circles around a kid being beaten up and cannot help but turn his head to look. He shares with Samuel (*Witness*), Cole (*The Sixth Sense*), and Bruce (*Batman Begins*) a formative experience of witnessing violence, but the problems posed for Tre are not the same. Tre is already being ensnared within a discourse of risk that positions young black boys as potential perpetrators of violence; as Andrés Leal argues, the urban environment in *Boyz n the Hood* becomes ‘a definitory element in the formation of the ‘hood individuals’ present and future identities’ (2013, 30). Tragedies have been pre-plotted in Tre’s life story: he only has to look.

Whether in the bucolic mode of *The Goonies* or the socially conscious mode of *Boyz in the Hood*, the Curious Boy often does the work of indirect social observation that is commonly assigned to cinema itself. The Curious Boy is able to notice events that adults either are unwilling to acknowledge, or have misrepresented for spurious reasons. Consider the boy protagonist who leads Steven Spielberg’s semi-autobiographical *The Fabelmans* (Spielberg 2022). The young Sammy develops an interest in filmmaking, and while reviewing a home video reel, discovers that his mother is having an affair. This revelation is the catalyst for the family separation that dominates the narrative of the film. A similar role for the boy artist is constructed in Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* (2014): as a young boy, Mason watches through a crack in the door as his mother’s boyfriend aggressively berates her. Later, as an adolescent, Mason pursues analogue photography as a way of preserving life moments against a deluge of digital images. Sammy and Mason each embody a capacity for careful looking that implicitly praises the social roles of filmmakers themselves; indeed, Steven Spielberg’s autobiographical markers in the characterisation of

Sammy make explicit this connection between the special boy who *looks* and the celebrated filmmaker who *shows*.⁵

While the Curious Boy in cinema is sometimes a vehicle for male filmmakers looking into an autobiographical past, the Curious Boy himself is most often found looking toward the future. As indicated in *Boy n the Hood*, which jumps forward to Tre as an adolescent navigating a violent social environment, the capacity of the Curious Boy to observe his world is coupled with the anticipation that the boy may later have the power to act in the world. The connection between present and future can be understood through what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 84) calls a ‘chronotope’, or an internally coherent block of space–time within a storytelling architecture. Bruce Wayne in DC Comics’ Batman franchise provides a particularly dramatic example of a boy character constructed through a chronotope: witnessing his parents’ murder as a child, Wayne’s early trauma comes to motivate all his (anti)heroic actions as an adult (see Moore 2020). But the chronotope of the boy who looks is not simply a convenient storytelling device: the chronotopical link between past, present, and future summons an implied moral schema around men and masculinities. Judith Keene (2016) argues that in Roberto Rossellini’s WWII film trilogy, the legacies of bad men are juxtaposed with and possibly displaced by the future promise of vivacious Italian boys. In this way, chronotopes of progress can enclose violence within a temporal frame that pushes the perceived causes of violence into the past (see Cover et al. 2017).

The chronotope of progress can also be found across *Australian Rules*, *Romulus*, and *True History*. In each film, Gary, Rai, and Ned (respectively) provide a viewpoint on the violence of the men they could potentially become, such that we come to expect that these narratives will resolve the relationship between the boys and the men. We know that Gary must confront his father in *Australian Rules*; that Ned Kelly must take revenge against the English police in *True History*; and that Mitru must be punished in *Romulus* (before this can happen, Mitru takes his own life). In this way, the Curious Boy is situated within a chronotope of progress that draws a moral comparison: a bad man and a good boy, a bad past and a good future. Such chronotopes of progress can, of course, be useful. For some viewers, stories about virtuous boys and the better men of the future might invite confidence in possibilities for social change, and therefore strengthen engagement with existing projects aimed to address domestic and family violence. Stories about sympathetic boy witnesses may also contribute to heightened trust in children themselves, who are often not believed when they report abuse (see Commonwealth of Australia 2022, 9). However, by summarily dealing justice to the male abusers, screen narratives can risk framing domestic and family violence witnessed in the present as *belonging to the past*. This pattern can be found in Hollywood cinema, too: ‘once the abuser is dead,’ writes Diane Shoos, ‘domestic violence and the abused woman’s victimization are no longer relevant, just as they are not – nor ever have been – of public concern’ (2017, 157). Commenting on narratives of historical progress, Shoos (2017, 7) coins the phrase ‘post-awareness’ to describe ‘our conviction that we have progressed beyond our past denial, that we are now not only savvy about but roundly condemn this form of violence and its perpetrators, and that we are sympathetic to and supportive of abused women’. In the case of *Australian Rules*, *Romulus*, and *True History*, the dissimulation of post-awareness within the diegesis is achieved through the transformative powers of the boys who look. And whatever one makes of the narrative plausibility of the virtues ascribed

to boys, one thing is for certain: social transformation does not seem to involve the words or actions of female characters. To this omission I now turn.

Looking Between Men

The reactive gaze was originally theorised by Carol J. Clover in the context of horror cinema, where victims would suddenly bare witness to an assailant. The reactive gaze of the Curious Boy is different in at least two important ways. First, as noted above, there is the chonotopical configuration: the boy does not act now, but he summons a future in which he could act. Second, the boy is not the only person harmed, and not necessarily the person who experiences the greatest harm. In the majority of films with boy witnesses, the shot of the boy who looks obscures or displaces the camera's view on others being harmed, and in the Australian examples cited above, these are women harmed by men's violence. The narrative significance of the gendered violence is therefore transferred from the impacts on adult women to the impact on the boy. I argue that this transfer is not an instance of the male gaze, in the sense of a predatory or assaultive gaze, but that it does produce a privileged form of 'looking between men'.

Australian Rules, *Romulus*, and *True History* are not films about women. In a character trope that Phillip Butterss (1998, 44) identifies in earlier cycle of films about groups of men Australian cinema, women are positioned as concerned but ineffective victims of the violence of men. For example, *Australian Rules* is unsure what to do with Gary's mother, Liz. She has minimal dialogue, takes no steps to protect her son from violence, and is edited into oblivion during a final confrontation between Gary and his father. For her part, Rai's mother Christine in *Romulus* is a more sympathetic character than Liz. But as Fincina Hoppgood (2016) notes, the film leans heavily into a moral indictment of Rai's mother as a negligent parent. Violence from a partner is introduced as the last in a string of catastrophes that befall Christine, and Mitru's transformation into a bad man is immediately resolved by his death. If Rai is a victim unable to speak, Christine is a victim whose capacity to speak dissolves in her characterisation as stereotypically hysterical. Finally, in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Ellen neither retaliates against the sergeant nor contributes to Ned's subsequent rebellion. Cast as a hapless and worrying mother, Ellen serves only to motivate Ned's fight against the English. Across *Australian Rules*, *Romulus*, and *True History*, the abused mother is cast as a weak fixture of the boy's troubled childhood, while the remedy becomes the restoration of a male authority.⁶ The chronotope that pushes bad men into the past also pushes these female characters into the past. In making this argument, I am not suggesting that boys' experiences of abuse are less important than those of mothers or other screen characters; certainly, it is worthwhile telling stories about boys' childhood traumas. My concern here, following Shoos (2017), is that domestic and family violence is represented a moral struggle for boys and men, such that the implied power of male witnessing is valued over the experiences or responses of women experiencing violence.

The narrative privilege accorded to boys (and future men) returns us to longstanding questions around the gendering of the gaze. As noted earlier, the reactive gaze as an expression of vulnerability is defined by Carol J. Clover as formally antithetical to the assaultive male gaze theorised by Laura Mulvey. However, the gaze does not need to be aggressive, controlling, or predatory in order for the camera to prioritise *looking*

between men.⁷ Looking between men can enact a transfer of moral agency away from women and toward male characters, even in storylines that primarily concern the harms experienced by women. Building on the pattern established across *Romulus*, *True History*, and *Australian Rules*, we can identify a key instance of looking between men in Australian crime drama *The Dry* (Connolly 2020), based on the 2016 Australian novel by Jane Harper. Protagonist Aaron Falk is a detective haunted by the death of his high school girlfriend, Ellie. The narrative jumps between Aaron's police investigation into a recent (and unrelated) family massacre, and flashbacks to events witnessed by the adolescent Aaron. In a late revelation, Aaron discovers through a hidden diary that Ellie had been subject to violence and sexual abuse by her father, Mal, and that she had died while trying to escape him. Through a cross-cutting sequence, we move between three locations: the historical story of Ellie packing her bags and leaving home, with Mal in pursuit; Aaron in the present, reading Ellie's diary and looking into the middle distance; and the elderly Mal in the present, languishing in his chair. The scene culminates with the juxtaposition between the mnemonic gazes of Aaron and Mal, with the camera slowly zooming into medium close-up shots of both faces. Ellie's story becomes a conduit for symbolic confrontation between Mal, the bad violent man, and Aaron, the good (but also violent) man. Although separated in space, Mal and Aaron are connected by an implied looking relation, such that Aaron can become the primary moral agent in casting judgement upon the guilty Mal.

Looking between men is not always a stabilising practice in cinema: sometimes the look can be disruptive of heteronormative looking relations. Reading William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), Max Fincher notes that 'looking between men upsets the idea that the subject and object of the gaze are always and forever gendered as masculine and feminine respectively' (2007, 125). Clover's framework also points to the ways that a reactive gaze might destabilise understandings of selfhood and identity, such that a vulnerable look from a male character can solicit interrogations of masculine identities *tout court*. But we can acknowledge the importance of exploring diverse masculinities on screen, while also challenging expectations that men should be the primary agents for solving social problems, or that the relationships between male characters must have greater moral saliency than those involving female characters.

I have so far treated the practice of looking not as disinterested observation but as motivated by concealed priorities within screen storytelling; namely, the desire to restore male agency and control over the scene of men's violence against women. Implicit has been the working assumption that filmmakers and audiences have not taken an authentic interest in the impact of domestic and family violence on boys, but have rather become attached to the boy as the future solution to present violence. To the extent that Australian screen production continues to be dominated by male creative teams (see Khoo et al. 2024), and by storylines about men's violence that centre men's solutions to violence, a critical viewpoint is needed on the narrative priority so frequently accorded to boy characters. But in the final section of this article, I want to consider another direction travelled by this boy who looks in Australian cinema: namely, the boy who is unable to resolve the problem of the violence he witnesses, because the violence attends the colonial – or postcolonizing – structure of Australian society itself.

The Look in Excess: *High Ground*

The scene of the boy who looks is an open text. As indicated earlier, the reactive gaze of the boy can serve a progressive purpose, in exposing difficult experiences in connection with domestic and family violence, or a regressive purpose, in over-valourising the moral agency of boys and men. Such scenes also play on conflicting understandings of boyhood as a period of innocence and as the site of primary and irrevocable trauma. My focus has so far been on the deployment of such scenes within their wider narrative contexts, but we might also consider what scenes of witnessing can do outside of – or in spite of – the *denouement* of the narrative. To adapt a concept from Gilles Deleuze (2006, 98–100), a shot may contain a virtual or potential aspect that is actualised within the subsequent presentation of a story, but could have been actualised otherwise. The virtual force of a shot can summon its own reality, its own divergent paths – the shot invites the viewer to consider *what could have been*. In the context of Hitchcock's thrillers, Ned Schantz (2010) describes these possible realities as 'shadow scenes', or 'the tendency of strong plot alternatives to overshadow certain key moments' (2). Shadow scenes are not simply fanciful alternatives to the film we are shown; rather, they are invoked from within the diegesis, such that the resolution of the plot 'as presented' does not remove the lingering sense of 'manifest incompleteness, confusion, or improbability' (3). In this section, I argue that scenes of witnessing can generate problems that are not always resolved within the diegetic narrative, and that open onto shadow scenes relating to a wider historical context. By way of example, I examine a traumatic event early in Australian film *High Ground* (Johnson 2020).

Filmed across both Arnhem Land and Kakadu National Park, *High Ground* was the product of close collaboration between Yolngu communities and its non-Indigenous director Stephen Maxwell Johnson (Zhou 2021). *High Ground* also belongs to a line of Australian films that thematises Indigenous boys' relationships to their communities and cultural identities: among these, Johnson's own *Yolngu Boy* (Johnson 2001), *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton 2009), *Toomelah* (Sen 2011), *Satellite Boy* (McKenzie 2012), and *The New Boy* (Thornton 2023), as well as celebrated documentaries *Zach's Ceremony* (Petersen 2016) and *In My Blood It Runs* (Newell 2019). Set in 1919, *High Ground* opens with a hunting scene: the Yolngu men are hunting wallabies, but a young Gutjuk spoils the hunt with a poorly thrown spear. The men tell Gutjuk to be more patient: watch and learn. Later, Gutjuk's mother and aunties pick up this theme: why does he always want to be with the men? He wants to grow up too fast, and he does not know his place. But Gutjuk is not given the opportunity to watch or learn, or to know his place.

Mounted white police officers arrive in the Yolngu community, ostensibly chasing criminal suspects. In a terrifying scene, the police shoot everyone except Gutjuk, who hides and watches from behind a tangle of branches. Mark McKenna (2021) cautions against an overly literal reading of the historical markers in *High Ground*, but Rademaker, Gumurdul, and May (2021) do suggest that the scene witnessed by Gutjuk most closely resembles the 1911 Gan Gan Massacre, 'in which mounted police killed more than 30 Yolngu people in a "punishment expedition"'. The massacre also introduces the metaphor from which the film pulls its title: white police sniper Travis watches the scene, through his rifle scope, from high ground. As Nicholas Godfrey (2021, 8) notes, the contrasting gaze of Travis (from above) and Gutjuk (hidden from the side) establishes an early connection

between the power within this colonial landscape and the force of the gaze. The prologue finishes with Travis bringing Gutjuk to East Alligator River Mission Outpost, and he is raised by white missionary Claire under a new name, Tommy. In the closing sequence of *High Ground*, the opening sequence is inverted. Perched on the high ground with a rifle, Gutjuk tracks the movements at the mission and of non-Indigenous police officers nearby: the hunters become the hunted.

The boy who looks in *High Ground* may seem unlike the boys in Australian cinema considered thus far. Gutjuk is not watching a scene of a domestic and family violence, but a scene of public violence by the coloniser against the colonised. On close inspection, though, this distinction becomes less tenable. As Amanda Keddie (2023, 310) has recently argued, efforts to prevent violence against women need to consider the destructive impacts of colonisation as relevant to the conduct of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous men:

These destructive impacts are evident in the gendered processes of colonisation through men's force, i.e. conquest and settlement (that massively disrupted Indigenous gender orders), through the subsequent establishment of stratifications around gendered divisions of labour and hierarchies of masculinities (defined around race and social class) and through the global institutionalising of neoliberal capitalism (which reorientated masculinities on a massive scale).

High Ground is not a story about exceptional violence that happens to impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, but is rather a story about the *constitutive* violence that underpins the racialised gender order in Australia. That Indigenous men are often stigmatised as perceived perpetrators of gender-based violence also means that complex cinematic representations of Indigenous boys are important for enhancing collective understandings of domestic and family violence within its colonial context. Against this context, Felicity Collins' reading of *Samson & Delilah* (Collins 2010) and Joanne Faulkner's commentary on *Toomelah* (Faulkner 2019) both emphasise the importance of telling complex stories about desire, aspiration, and agency for Aboriginal children.

High Ground provides space for Gutjuk to have anger, to plan his revenge, and to experience genuine moral indecision. Certainly, *High Ground* does reproduce some of the gendered dynamics observed in the Australian films discussed above. The ending of the film is orchestrated as a conventional Hollywood Western shootout with familiar gender roles: Gutjuk rides off on horseback with a Yolngu woman, Gulwirri, while Claire weeps over Travis' body. In this respect, the gender dynamics of *High Ground* might be read within the ambitions and trappings of genre play. But the scene of witnessing in the opening to *High Ground* exceeds the meanings conveyed in the film's *denouement*. The massacres of Australia's Frontier Wars are not events locked away in a receding past: the history of colonial massacres, and the significance of these sites of violence, form part of the intangible heritage sustained by Aboriginal peoples through practices of memory work and storytelling (see Whittington 2024). And colonial violence itself has not disappeared. Rather, the violence of dispossession persists through what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015, 10) describes as a postcolonizing – rather than as a postcolonial – project. In this context, the shock of Gutjuk witnessing a massacre cannot be resolved through a single act of retribution against the specific men identified in *High Ground*. The colonial project continues well beyond Gutjuk's lifetime into the historical present. Gutjuk

is not a moral witness waiting for personal closure: he a public historian and an outsider criminologist (see Porter 2019). The inaugural violence in *High Ground* therefore persists as a public demand upon the viewer to reckon with the continuity of violence in the present, and this is simply not a problem that the characters in the film can solve.

Conclusion: Doing Nothing

The boy who looks is not, by any ordinary measure, doing anything. He is not the spying Pricò in Vittorio De Sica's *The Children are Watching Us* (1943): he is not running, spilling, biting, or screaming. He just looks and does nothing. This doing nothing is repeated often for Hollywood's Curious Boys, and for Australia's Curious Boys who witness domestic and family violence. In *The Dry*, Aaron is too late to do anything, and in *High Ground*, Gutjuk is too scared to do anything – at least, for now. The frozen moment of looking is not stereotypically boyish in a behavioural sense: this is not the boy of energy, adventure, or risk. But the scene builds on a perceived tension between the boy's inability to act now and the idea of man as agent of change. I have therefore argued that boys are too often conscripted as change agents in stories about bad men, as if collective change could only take place by getting boyhood 'right' and fixing masculinities once and for all (see Waling 2019).

But the scene of looking and *doing nothing* also matters. The violence documented in the films discussed is violence about which Australia does not do enough. Collective failures in acknowledging and responding to the nationwide pandemic of domestic and family violence are well-documented (see Sutherland et al. 2019; Uibu 2020). For its part, *High Ground* follows *The Tracker* (de Heer 2002) in seeking to remediate 'the active forgetting, erasure and invisibility of frontier trauma that rests at the core of Australia's national memory' (Bullock 2016, 307). This is how the Australian motif of the boy who looks differs from the iconic example cited in *Witness* (Weir 1985). In *Witness*, the young Samuel looks at exceptional violence: a corrupt cop executing another cop. The violence is so unusual that officer John Book will stop at nothing to remediate to the transgression. But across *Australian Rules*, *Romulus*, *True History*, *The Dry*, and *High Ground*, the boys witness violence that is not exceptional: the violence is widespread and demands a continuing collective response. The scene of violence, cross-cut with inaction from a witness, may speak to something uncomfortable about the inaction around the violence represented. After all, doing nothing has become part of the long public history of gendered violence and colonial violence in Australia. As the example of *High Ground* illustrates, the horror of the violence does not necessarily dissipate when violent actions are followed by reparative actions. Rather, through a motif that exceeds its narrative, the boy who looks and does nothing can link individual trauma to collective responsibility. That this violence continues to be represented through stories that privilege boys and men is, perhaps, an ongoing challenge to be overcome in contemporary Australian cinema.

Notes

1. *Witness* was directed by Australian filmmaker Peter Weir but is a US-based production for all other purposes.

2. On *pathos* in relation to the displayed emotions of a character, see Williams (1998, 49).
3. This parallels earlier concerns raised by Jill Bennett (2005, 49–50) that visual cultures around pain and trauma have often over-emphasised the inexpressibility of violence from the viewpoint of the individual, while neglecting the public and institutional character of violence (including inadequate policing responses to violence).
4. On *Boyz n the Hood* and New Black Realism, see Bausch (2013).
5. As Molly Lewis (2021) suggests in her reading of Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumble Fish* (1983), cinematic stories about boyhood are often imbued with registers of personal nostalgia from directors themselves.
6. A similar characterisation of mothers can be found in *Snowtown* (Kurzle 2011). L. H. Stallings (2019) identifies parallel issues in the characterisation of motherhood throughout Barry Jenkins' coming-of-age film *Moonlight* (2016).
7. On 'looking relations' in cinema, see E. Ann Kaplan (1997).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [grant number SR200200605].

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