

*Offending Youth: Sex, Crime and Justice* would make an excellent resource for an analytical paper on the growing trend of youth violence in Australia.

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## ANIMAL KINGDOM

Directed and written by David Michôd; starring Joel Edgerton, Luke Ford, Ben Mendelsohn, Guy Pearce, Jacki Weaver; 2010; 112 mins.

Inspired by events in the late 1980s, the film *Animal Kingdom* continues Melbourne's love affair with violent crime, murder in particular. It may seem surprising that in a city renowned for being amongst the world's most liveable, violent death, on screen and in the streets, remains an enduring motif. Shot in Melbourne's inner city lanes and backstreets, *Homicide*, Crawford Production's original television series based on their successful radio show D24, debuted in 1964 and finished in 1976 after more than 500 episodes. Melbourne's recent gangland killings — more than 30 over ten years — were home delivered, in the cringe-worthy series *Underbelly*.

Former factional leader in the Ship Painters and Dockers Union, and convicted murderer, Bill Longley, interviewed on ABC Radio National, put the gangland murders in historical context arguing that:

Melbourne is your murder capital, you know, it's not only the murder capital of Australia, you could say it was one of the murder capitals of the world, because it's been going on ever since I can remember, you know, always your odd gangland shooting, always, always.<sup>1</sup>

Murder lives on in the popular imagination at the location of infamous slayings. Easey Street, Hoddle Street, Russell Street and Walsh Street are amongst the major coordinates on the city's contemporary murder map. *Animal Kingdom* is inspired by the events leading up to and surrounding the October 1998 fatal shooting of two young policemen in Walsh Street, South Yarra. The officers were shot while on a routine check of a suspected stolen vehicle. Police believed the murders were a payback for the Armed Robbery Squad's

fatal shooting, thirteen hours previously, of the likeable convicted armed robber, Graeme Jensen. Jensen was shot in the back of the head by members of the squad, in a shopping centre parking lot, while driving away from police. He had gone to the shops to buy a lawn mower spark plug.

Family and friends always suspected a set up and maintain that the (inoperable) gun police said Jensen pointed at them was a 'thrown down', planted by police after the shooting. Police pulled out all stops after Walsh Street. Within six months, two of Jensen's associates, Gary Abdallah and Jedd Houghton, were shot and killed by police in circumstances that led some to believe 'revenge had overcome reason' amongst police.

Four men, associates of Jensen, were charged over the Walsh Street killings and found not guilty by a jury. The police continue to believe they were guilty. In 1993, in news that made headlines around the world, ten serving and one former police officer were charged in relation to the fatal shootings of Abdallah and Jensen. After some political manoeuvring that resulted in the resignation of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the charges were dropped against all but three of the police, who were subsequently found not guilty.

Those who have followed the city's real life drama of police murder, gangland killings and crime wars will recognise some of the film's characters: the two innocent young police, the bank robber crew, the young man caught between bent cops and his family, the family matriarch, the cocaine addicted lawyer, homicidal police, outgunned straight police, corrupt drug cops and civilian collateral damage. The film invokes a gritty realism but it isn't real. The narrative takes on the flavour of Melbourne, the life and crimes, circa 1988, but it isn't a documentary; rather it is a synthesis of people and events.

The film is intense, compelling and intelligent. It is critically acclaimed and has won international awards. The performances are outstanding. At heart, it is a crime family drama where loyalty and rivalry are confronted head on. 'Families: can't live with them, can't shoot them' provides a succinct summary of, and critical

rebuttal to, one of the film's central themes. It is also a coming of age film where the central character, James Frecheville, playing seventeen year old 'J', has to discover where he fits in, in order to survive.

The film captures an important shift in the business of crime and policing. Black and white surveillance tapes of bank robberies feature over the opening credits. The older generation of viewers will recognise these scenes from television news of decades ago. By the late 1980s, old school armed robbers and their counterparts in the Armed Robbery Squad were at the end of their run. The banks had hardened as targets so that making a living out of robbing them had had its day. In one scene, two professional armed robbers talk about alternative ways of making a living, one optimistic about making it on the stock market and the other confused and frightened about an uncertain future.

As robbing banks (but not robber banks, which continued to make a killing) faded into history, the trade in illicit drugs took over as the staple criminal enterprise. In the days when armed robbery was ascendant, the Armed Robbery Squad was real police. The ARS official tie featured a pistol motif and those who wore them were married to the hard life of the brotherhood. Brutality was normal and considered 'noble' in the cause of catching crooks. When those crooks proved too elusive for the justice system, summary execution was a possibility.

The tension between the old and new ways of doing the business of crime is deftly woven into the film's plot. In one scene a drug dealing crook, working in harmony with the Drug Squad, asks his armed robber mate, worried about the police, why he doesn't 'give them a drink', that is, cut them in on the action. His mate responds, 'It's the Armed Robbery Squad, they don't do business'. One of *Animal Kingdom's* strengths, and it has many, is that it acknowledges the many bridges and roundabouts between the over and underworlds.

The business of chasing profits is the modern heart of police corruption. Entrepreneurial considerations have overtaken ideological ones in deciding who is 'off'. The relationship between the

Drug Squad and major drug dealers was central to the gangland killings. Eight former Victoria Police Drug Squad members have been imprisoned for corrupt activities. Somewhere along the line the squad, now disbanded, moved on from simply 'taking a drink' to trading drugs. Police officer Malcolm Rosenes, present when Graeme Jensen was killed by the ARS, tried to cut a deal when his on the job drug trafficking was exposed. He became a Crown witness and gave a statement alleging that the gun found in Jensen's car was planted by the ARS, after he was shot. The official line is that his evidence is not credible and the Jensen case remains closed.

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#### REFERENCES

1. Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) 'Melbourne murders: Feuds, drugs and egos', *Background Briefing*, 13 June 2004, <[abc.net.au/rn/backgroundbriefing/stories/2004/1133269.htm](http://abc.net.au/rn/backgroundbriefing/stories/2004/1133269.htm)> at 5 August 2010.

## AVATAR

Written and directed by James Cameron; starring Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Sigourney Weaver; 2009; 162 mins.

As I was watching the film *Avatar* and the cinemagoers around me were cheering on the Na'vi heroes in their fight against human invaders, I couldn't help but wonder how many of us would actually want to live alongside such an uncompromising society. Why is the audience intended to admire the Na'vi's complete self-satisfaction and unwillingness to deal with humans despite the fact that it is Na'vi isolationism and idealism as much as human avarice which drive the two groups into conflict.

Thinking about it I realised it is hardly an isolated case. In our stories we love idealistic heroes to fight for what they believe in against all odds. But if we were to encounter such uncompromising characters in our families or offices they would strike us as unreasonable lunatics. I am reminded of what Alan Moore, creator of *Watchmen*, was reported to have thought we would call an archetypal,

vengeance-fuelled vigilante like Batman in the real world: 'in short, a nutcase'.

Why is it that rather than celebrate the values of conflict resolution, tolerance and deal-making, which make our advanced societies function so effectively, our favourite stories continue to be about zero-sum conflicts that are impossible to resolve peaceably? From afar, the kind of conflict found in *Avatar* seems noble.

We can easily imagine one side to be all good and the other all bad. There is no need to dwell on the suffering of those extras who die in battle or the problems that go unsolved back on Earth for want of 'unobtainium'. A quick cut to the next scene is always just seconds away! But in real life, conflict is painful and messy and something we work hard to avoid.

In fact we are so used to finding compromises in our everyday lives that to make his conflict story hang together, writer and director James Cameron is forced to pile absurdity upon absurdity: an intelligent species totally disinterested in trade with aliens and the magical technology they bring; a business that sees fighting interstellar war as a cheaper way to access 'unobtainium' than a peace treaty; a race of people willing to reveal all their secrets to conspicuous spies, but unwilling to negotiate or make concessions to humans even in the face of a catastrophic defeat. The crazy plot twists used to make compromise impossible result in a world unlike anything on Earth and as a result the movie is unable to teach us anything useful about how we ought to live.

Finally, we are led to a *deus ex machine* moment in which the megafauna of Pandora rise up to repel the human colonisers. To my knowledge, a revolt of Gaia is beyond the powers of the hunter gatherer tribes today struggling to coexist with industrial society, so I'm not sure what they can hope to take away from *Avatar*. The apparent moral of *Avatar*, 'fight hard if you're in the right and Gaia will provide', is one only someone very isolated from the real challenges of hunter gatherers could put forward.

Why does popular fiction so often favour staunch idealism over the central wisdom

embodied in modern political systems and their laws: 'dealism'? We could tell stories of the countless political compromises reached through well-functioning democratic institutions. We could tell the stories of all the terrible wars that never happened because of careful diplomacy. We could tell the story of the merchant who buys low and sells high, leaving everyone they deal with a little better off.

These are the everyday tales which make modern society so great to live in. But will any such movie gross a billion dollars in the near future? I suspect not.

An Australian movie with a very similar plot to *Avatar* is *The Castle*, in which the Kerrigan family fights the compulsory acquisition of their home for the expansion of Melbourne Airport. Audiences were predictably united in their support for the charming Kerrigan family in their struggle against big business. In real life, I suspect the public would be strongly divided on the fairness of the acquisition, especially if sticking up for the Kerrigan family meant airport delays and fewer discount airlines. We would want to find a deal which left both the Kerrigans better off and allowed for a larger airport by offering them more and more compensation until they voluntarily moved.

Why split our values like this, some for our stories and others for our own lives? I suspect the answer lies in what we subconsciously want our taste in fiction to say about us. Celebrating the Na'vi allows us to signal how much we value loyalty and justice. Denigrating Melbourne Airport allows us to show our suspicion of greedy and powerful people. In real life, when defending our stated values requires that we make serious sacrifices whether or not we are likely to win, we sensibly value the opportunity to compromise. But when a fictional character will do all the fighting for you, why compromise on anything?

Though popular fiction will never say it, we know the best fight is not that won by the righteous but the one nobody needed fight in the first place.

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