Article by Maria Joseph

**ONE NIGHT THE MOON**

Directed by Rachel Perkins

*One Night the Moon* is directed by Rachel Perkins and was released in 2001. Perkins is an Indigenous Australian, an Arrernte woman from the Central Desert region near Alice Springs. She grew up in Canberra, the daughter of renowned Aboriginal activist Charles Perkins, who died whilst the film was in production. *One Night the Moon* is dedicated to his memory.


Paul Kelly is a principal actor and musician in *One Night the Moon*, playing the father, Jim. As a musician he is known for his insightful lyrics that comment on modern Australian life. At the time of making *One Night the Moon*, Kelly was married to Kaarin Fairfax, who plays Rose. Their actual daughter, Memphis, plays Emily.

**The Imaginative Landscape in One Night the Moon**

At one level ‘The Imaginative Landscape’ can be simply interpreted as having to do with representations of the land. Writers and directors create the settings of their narratives in order to convey meaning. We all know that a thunderstorm or wild wind suggests something dramatic or tragic is likely to happen in the story. A narrative with a negative outcome or a critical message may be set in a landscape that conveys pessimism, such as a grungy cityscape. Conversely, a writer may have a fondness or attachment to certain parts of his or her country and so portray that landscape idyllically. Thus, two writers may portray the same space in two completely different ways, depending on the desired effect. This is the way artists construct or ‘imagine’ landscapes according to meaning. The land, and the way it is portrayed, leads the reader or viewer to feel the intended emotion. The landscape in *One Night the Moon* can be read by the audience as a vast Gothic wilderness that
makes the white settlers seem insignificant. The land is full of perceived threats for the settlers, but full of meaning for the Aboriginal people.

In a direct sense the land may influence who we are as people. A harsh environment may cause people to develop stoic traits. Different cultures may respond to their environments in different ways. Yet there are other ‘landscapes’ apart from those related to the land. The society in which we live is a kind of landscape, one often shaped by the physical landscape; our emotions, beliefs and thoughts are mapped for us by the discourses surrounding us. Moreover, our interior selves are affected by the exterior world. The interior ‘landscape’ of an individual character may change due to external circumstances. One Night the Moon deals with the external landscape of the Australian outback. It also represents the social clash between white settler and Indigenous discourses, and portrays the effect of this on individual characters.

**A single landscape can be experienced in multiple ways**

In One Night the Moon Rachel Perkins constructs two contrasting views of the Australian landscape. For the white settlers she portrays a barren, vast land in which the settlers are isolated and vulnerable. In contrast, she also shows the land through the eyes of the Indigenous character, Albert Chang, who is able to see minuscule changes and detail in the landscape. For him, the landscape can be ‘read’ as a source of critical information.

For Albert, the land is not immense, indistinguishable, and unknowable. He has an intimate understanding of the environment. This is shown when he is finally allowed to follow Emily’s tracks. He can see small disturbances in the patterns of rocks and finds strands of her hair on the edge of branches. Beyond the fenced-off boundaries of the white settlers, the land is timeless. This is shown by Perkins in the final shots of the film: aerial shots in which the human tragedy just enacted is lost in the timeless landscape below. The lyrics, ‘far beyond both time and place’, underscore this. Charles Perkins’ words at the end of the film – ‘We cannot live in the past, but the past lives within us’ – suggest that Aboriginal people literally embody the timeless history of the land and are its guardians. The contrast between settler and Indigenous viewpoints of the land is demonstrated when Albert sings in counterpoint...
to Jim, ‘This land is me’ [emphasis added]. Albert is not interested in property in the
European sense of ownership. The land is his identity. ‘My being’s here where I
belong / This land owns me,’ he sings. As the land is inherent within Albert, it is not
something that can be easily taken from him despite the white settlers’ erection of
physical fences and barriers. Perkins represents this difference of viewpoint in
relationship to the land when she has Jim and Albert walk off in opposite directions
during this song. Their views are completely divergent.

Perkins asserts that the rejection of Aboriginal knowledge and understanding of the
landscape can lead to tragedy and is in itself tragic. It becomes apparent that, had
Albert been allowed to lead the search for Emily, he may have found her swiftly and
saved her life. Perkins shows Albert’s humanity through the pain of his rejection and
the insult to his dignity. As a father himself, Albert feels for the loss of the young girl.
He knows the search party is literally and metaphorically, ‘going the wrong way’. He
also knows that they are senselessly trampling on and ruining Emily’s tracks. In
despair and frustration at Jim Ryan's narrow-mindedness he hands in his police
uniform, symbolising his wish to disassociate himself from a white society which has
humiliated him and his cultural knowledge. He maintains his personal sense of
dignity when he sings, ‘You can walk with dignity / With ancient knowledge and
wisdom / The spirit of this land.’ In spite of his resignation from official police duties,
Albert still longs to be helpful and even goes to Jim’s house to search for clues. But
given his treatment by (and lowly status within) white society, he can only help when
invited to do so. In an interview with the ABC’s 7.30 Report, Rachel Perkins
emphasises this frustration that many Aboriginal people feel: ‘There’s a lot of
knowledge that has been offered you know, 250 languages, the knowledge of
country, landscapes, spiritualism that’s been offered and hasn’t been taken up by
Australia.’ In One Night the Moon Perkins has the audience sympathise with Albert
due to his gentle and compassionate nature, and share in his frustration after Jim’s
dismissal of his cultural skills.

Towards the end of One Night the Moon there is a reconciliation of sorts between the
Aboriginal and white settler viewpoints. The universal love for children brings the two
communities together as all parties feel Emily’s loss. It has taken the tragic death of
a child to bring the emotional landscapes of the two families into alignment. Jim is
not at the funeral. His shame and failure to rescue his daughter from the harsh outback landscape have led to his suicide. This is therefore an incomplete reconciliation, one marred by folly and tragedy.

*One Night the Moon* is a musical. Like many Western operas it contains elements of tragedy such as Emily and Jim's deaths. Much of the music also has a Celtic flavour; pipes and fiddles reflect the Ryans' Irish background, adding to the layered cultural landscape of the film. The music becomes a hybrid that includes Aboriginal voices and instruments as well. Albert and Bernice sing, and a didgeridoo is played. ‘Songs’ are an important factor in Aboriginal cultures in the sense that each person has their own ‘songline’ which represents their territory or part of the land over which they have in-depth knowledge. The ‘songline’ is an oral history of a piece of land that has been passed down through the ages. In some senses the soundtrack of *One Night the Moon* can be seen as an attempt to reconcile Aboriginal and white settler voices in a new kind of musical theatre that embraces both cultures. Just as the music can intertwine to form a new score, so too can our cultural voices.

**Discussion questions**

- If you were to re-shoot the Australian landscape from an entirely Aboriginal perspective, what techniques would you use? How would the portrayal of the landscape be different to that of the Gothic depiction outlined above?

- What would it be like for Albert as a policeman in the pay of the white settlers? What internal and external conflicts might he suffer as a result?

- Do you think that the differences between Indigenous and European relationships to the land are irreconcilable? Why or why not? What does Perkins suggest?

- Explore the nexus between attitudes to land and the way different groups respond to and treat the landscape. For example, in relation to this film, do you think that Aboriginal people share their lives with the land which they aim to understand, whereas whites think they have to conquer the land to meet their perceived needs and ideas?
A powerful landscape can remind people of their insignificance

Perkins frequently uses long shots of the mountains and plains. The frame is generally made up of three-quarters sky and rolling clouds. The immensity of this landscape makes humans seem insignificant, and a lost little girl extremely hard to find. The landscape, from the white settlers' viewpoint, is awe-inspiring and frightening. This feeling of fear and awe is an important aspect of Gothic literature. ‘Gothic’ refers to a genre which is characterised by gloomy settings, mysterious or violent events, and an atmosphere of degeneration and decay. The Flinders Ranges in South Australia provide a dramatic backdrop to the story in One Night the Moon.

Perkins exaggerates the drama of the landscape through various film techniques to create a Gothic effect. Post-production sound is used to emphasise the wind and the chirruping of insects. The sound of cicadas is similarly used by Ray Lawrence in Lantana to create the tension in a 'murder' mystery story. One Night the Moon also belongs to the mystery genre. The viewer knows Emily has crawled out of the window entranced by the moon but after that we, like her parents, do not know the details of her fate.

The white settlers are isolated in a landscape that is harsh and foreign to them. The Ryans' homestead is a white-washed oasis, or light-box, in a vast, dark, arid wilderness. The land around their house is flat and barren. At night, apart from the moon, theirs is the only light on the horizon. The trees are scant and skeletal. From the white settlers' point of view, there are few animals in this landscape, nothing green that grows, no sustenance. This is a land that offers them little solace. The pioneers’ dream of abundance and wealth is undermined by the implacable landscape. This is a land of tragedy. The death of Emily is like that of the slaughtered sheep; both are foreign animals that have lost their way in a landscape that will kill them.

The story of a little white girl lost, or disappearing mysteriously, is a regular tale in Australian literature. Young girls are traditionally seen as innocent and vulnerable and therefore inspire pity and sympathy in the audience. For instance, Picnic at Hanging Rock traces the disappearance of three school girls on St Valentine’s Day in 1900 and is directed in such a way as to exaggerate the Gothic elements of the
Australian landscape. The rock is shot from below, emphasising its immense height and power. In both films there is something unspoken, a fearful power, that the land itself contains. It is as if there is a power at work that is not human, symbolised by the moon in *One Night the Moon*, and by the monolith in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. In this respect the landscape becomes personified, having a recognisable personality as strong (or stronger) than the human characters. In both films a ‘haunting’ soundtrack is used to carry this emotion of the ‘sublime’, or fearful grandeur, to the audience.

**Discussion questions**

- Can you think of other examples of the Australian Gothic and depictions of people feeling dwarfed by the landscape? What does this feeling of awe and fear tell you about the white settlers’ attitude towards their new homeland?

- The harsh Australian outback is very different from the green English countryside from which the white settlers originally came. In what ways does the film suggest that we will always feel more at home in the landscape of our birth?

**A landscape can be a contested space**

The landscape in *One Night the Moon* is depicted as a site of struggle between white and Indigenous people, reflecting and evoking their differing ideas of ‘ownership’ of the land. This struggle is encapsulated in the song ‘This Land is Mine’, sung in counterpoint by Jim and Albert. The contrast in the film between Indigenous and white interpretations of the land is not portrayed as a merely benign difference of opinion – these irreconcilable viewpoints are inextricably bound up in the problem of ownership over the land that, historically, has led to violent conflict between white settlers and Indigenous Australians.

Perkins shows how each character has a particular relationship to their surroundings. She also reconstructs the social landscape of Australia in 1932. This is a racist society in which Aboriginal people are denied basic rights and dignity. In 1932 Aboriginal people had limited rights to vote and were not seen as full Australian...
citizens. They received less pay and had poorer working conditions than their white settler counterparts. Aboriginal land rights were negated by the concept of terra nullius; in other words, the British treated Australia as un-owned land, available to be taken, without the need to pay Aboriginal owners. Perkins portrays this landscape of inequality in her film.

Jim Ryan’s claim to the land is predicated on his physical use of it – he sings that he owns the land ‘all the way to the old fence line’. In the eyes of the white settlers, the staking of boundaries and the cultivation of soil earned them the right to consider the land their own. But the very need to erect fences reveals the uneasy and unspoken recognition on the part of Jim, and of white settlers generally, of the prior claim of Indigenous people to the land. This is demonstrated in the scene in which the search party arrive at the Ryans’ property to begin the search for Emily. When he is told ‘This is Albert’s country, he knows this land’, Jim cannot deny it. But, rather than acknowledge the Indigenous tracker’s relationship with the land, Jim is roused to a defensive restatement of his claim of ownership – ‘No blacks on my land.’ His claim to the land rests on exclusion, and Albert is an uncomfortable reminder that there may be other sorts of ownership, which Jim can neither understand nor compete with.

Perkins demonstrates the way in which a landscape can reflect and be transformed by the struggle over its possession through the depiction of the environment as changeable, even troubled – at times vulnerable and at others menacing. The Ryans act upon the land by gouging holes in the dirt to erect fences and tackling its barren uncooperativeness in an attempt to eke a living from it. The land resists, as epitomised in the scene in which Rose attempts to plant a garden but can churn up only dirt. By contrast, Albert and his family live in humble cooperation with the environment and the lush greenness of the land immediately surrounding their shack suggests that the landscape responds generously to the respect they offer it.
Discussion questions

- Can you think of any other contested landscapes? Are these struggles connected with different interpretations of, or relationships with, the land?

- Do differing interpretations of a landscape always lead to conflict?

- What does the film suggest about the possibility of resolving the conflict between settlers and Indigenous Australians over ownership of the land?

The landscape is full of perceived threats

Alongside the white settlers’ fear of the Australian environment lies their fear of the Indigenous inhabitants. In One Night the Moon, Albert Chang is the source of this fear. There is never any suggestion that Albert is a dangerous man, yet Rose in particular shows her fear of him. She prevents Emily from waving at him when they pass him on the road and does not offer him any tea when he arrives with the search party. She is frightened when she discovers him in Emily’s room and orders him to ‘get out!’ Beneath this is a fear of miscegenation – the fear of the black man as rapist. It is only when Rose believes Albert knows something helpful about Emily’s disappearance that she overcomes her fear and approaches him.

While Rose’s fear of Aboriginal people is physical and sexual, Jim’s fear is based on property and ownership. He marks their territory with fences and a veranda around the simple stone house. In a sense, Jim is not only attempting to build a barrier between his family and the Indigenous people, but between his property and the landscape itself – immense, alien and threatening. The fence is flimsy at best, yet it has a heavy gate which Jim is always sure to open and pass through. The gate is absurd, but it is symbolic of the fact that this is his property. This is reinforced in the following song when he sings ‘This land is mine’ [emphasis added]. He mentions a party of Aborigines at the creek and declares of his land, ‘They won’t take it away from me’. There is some sympathy for Jim as he is hard working and genuinely desperate to find his daughter. The song which marks his suicide is full of lost dreams. He sings, ‘Once I knew how the world worked … now I don’t know anything anymore.’ The overhead shot in the opening sequence emphasises his despair as he holds his head in his hands. Perkins also circles back to this song after the
reasons for Jim’s despair have been revealed. Unfortunately for the Ryan family, Jim’s narrow view of Albert and his people leads to the death of Emily as he is unable to find her by himself. Perkins shows that white man alone is helpless in this landscape and that Jim therefore does not truly own his land.

Discussion questions

- Put yourself in Rose’s shoes when she finds Albert in Emily’s room. What would you be thinking? What fears would you have? Would these fears be justifiable?
- Do you feel any sympathy for Jim? Is he right to defend his land?
- Do you think the settlers’ fear of the land is reasonable? Why or why not?

SAMPLE SCENE ANALYSIS

This section shows you how to identify and discuss key Context ideas in an important scene from One Night the Moon. See the chapter ‘Unfinished Business’ on the DVD and watch the scene in which Albert begins the search for Emily.

Summary

Rose follows Albert as he searches for Emily’s trail. At one point he loses the track but his patient investigation of the land reveals a clue and he is able to call out ‘I found it’ to an anxious waiting Rose. The scene is intercut with shots of Jim coming home and finding Rose gone. He goes to the kitchen and begins to make his way, with steady desperation, through several bottles of beer.

Questions for exploring ideas

- What does the scene suggest about Albert’s relationship with, and knowledge of, the landscape? How does Rose’s response to the landscape differ from Albert’s?
- How does the scene show the changed relationship between Albert and Rose?
• In the scene previous to this one, Jim is shown searching for Emily until he collapses. What is the effect of juxtaposing the searches of the two men (Albert and Jim) in this way? What does the contrast suggest about their differing relationships with the land?

• Rose and Jim are both grieving for their missing daughter, but they respond to their despair in quite different ways. While Jim continues searching for Emily, Rose is often depicted on the veranda, staring out at the vast landscape about her. To what extent are their differing responses to the tragedy a result of their gender roles? In what ways do these roles encourage or inhibit certain interactions with the land? (Consider, for instance, the fact that Rose rarely ventures beyond the fenced boundary of their property, and the fact that the search party is entirely male.)

• The title of this chapter and the song, ‘Unfinished Business’ refers on one level to the unfinished search for Emily. In what other senses might there be unfinished business between Rose and Albert, and the different cultures they represent?

• *One Night the Moon* confronts us with different extremely different responses to the landscape. Does the film suggest that humans create their own imaginative landscape?

**Focus on text features**

As well as drawing on ideas from *One Night the Moon* in your writing about The Imaginative Landscape, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the text. For example, the following aspects of *One Night the Moon* may influence how you choose to use language in the text you create:

• Aerial shots / long shots of landscape. Create a particular atmosphere by describing an Australian setting. Think of the weather, the land, the foliage and the mountains. Have an isolated farm house. Consider the effects that such a landscape might have upon its inhabitants.
• Juxtaposition of white settler and Indigenous Australian voices. Compare and contrast different views of the Australian landscape. You might consider perspectives other than those depicted in the film – for instance, how might immigrants from other parts of the world respond to the Australian landscape? Have individuals from different backgrounds talk to each other in dialogue or in parallel monologues.

• Use of songs. Explore Australia’s multicultural musical heritage. Create some lyrics in the voices of different characters that explore issues of identity and relationship to the landscape.

• Use of the ‘little girl lost’ trope. Write a piece that uses the idea of a vulnerable little girl lost. Connect this with other examples of Australian Gothic texts you know. Consider why this idea has been so influential in Australian literary and filmic history. What does its potency suggest about our attitude towards the land?

Points of view on the Context

These discussion questions and activities are designed to help you reflect on ideas raised by the Context in your chosen text. It is important that you develop your own point of view on these ideas:

For further discussion/writing

• How do Aboriginal people figure in the mental and emotional landscape of the white settlers? For example, consider Rose’s order: ‘Get out, go on, get out.’ Why does Rose talk to Albert in this way? What does it show you about her attitude towards Aborigines? How would you feel if you were Albert and addressed in this manner?

• What are the contrasting features of the white settler and Indigenous views of the landscape? Is one landscape presented as more appealing than the other? How does Perkins achieve this?
• How do Rose and Jim’s views differ in regard to the landscape and their role as settlers? Is there a difference because of the gender divide? What problems does this cause in their relationship?

• How do characters’ attitudes to the social and physical landscape change over the course of the text? For instance, how does Rose change her viewpoint? What does the final shot of Rose alone by Emily’s graveside signify? What does Jim’s fate tell you about his adaptability?

• ‘People from different cultures can read the same landscape differently.’

• ‘The ways in which people treat the landscape is indicative of who they are as a society.’

• ‘Who we are in relation to the land shows us who we are inside.’

• ‘Writers / directors create landscapes for particular atmospheres and effects.’

• ‘We project different emotions, such as fear, onto the landscape around us.’

Activities

• Imagine that Jim took the time to write a suicide note before taking his own life. Write of his reaction to the sight of his daughter’s body in Albert’s arms, his frustrating battle with the Australian landscape and the deterioration of his relationship with Rose.

• Research and prepare an oral presentation on white settler representations of the Australian landscape found in other texts.

• In your school library locate images of two or more paintings of the Australian landscape by white settlers, and two or more representations of the landscape by Indigenous artists. Make a presentation to your class explaining the differences and similarities between white and Indigenous representations of the landscape.

• Research major Aboriginal land rights claims, such as the 1971 Gove land rights case and the 1992 Mabo case.
• Write and perform a dialogue between two characters from the text, such as Jim and Albert or Rose and Bernice, showing their differing viewpoints on the landscape.

The text


Other resources

*ABC 7.30 Report* 2001, ‘Rachel Perkins speaks about her film *One Night the Moon.*’ Interview with Maxine McKew, 17 December.


*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, 1975, dir. Peter Weir, Australian Film Commission. Starring Rachel Roberts and Helen Morse.