

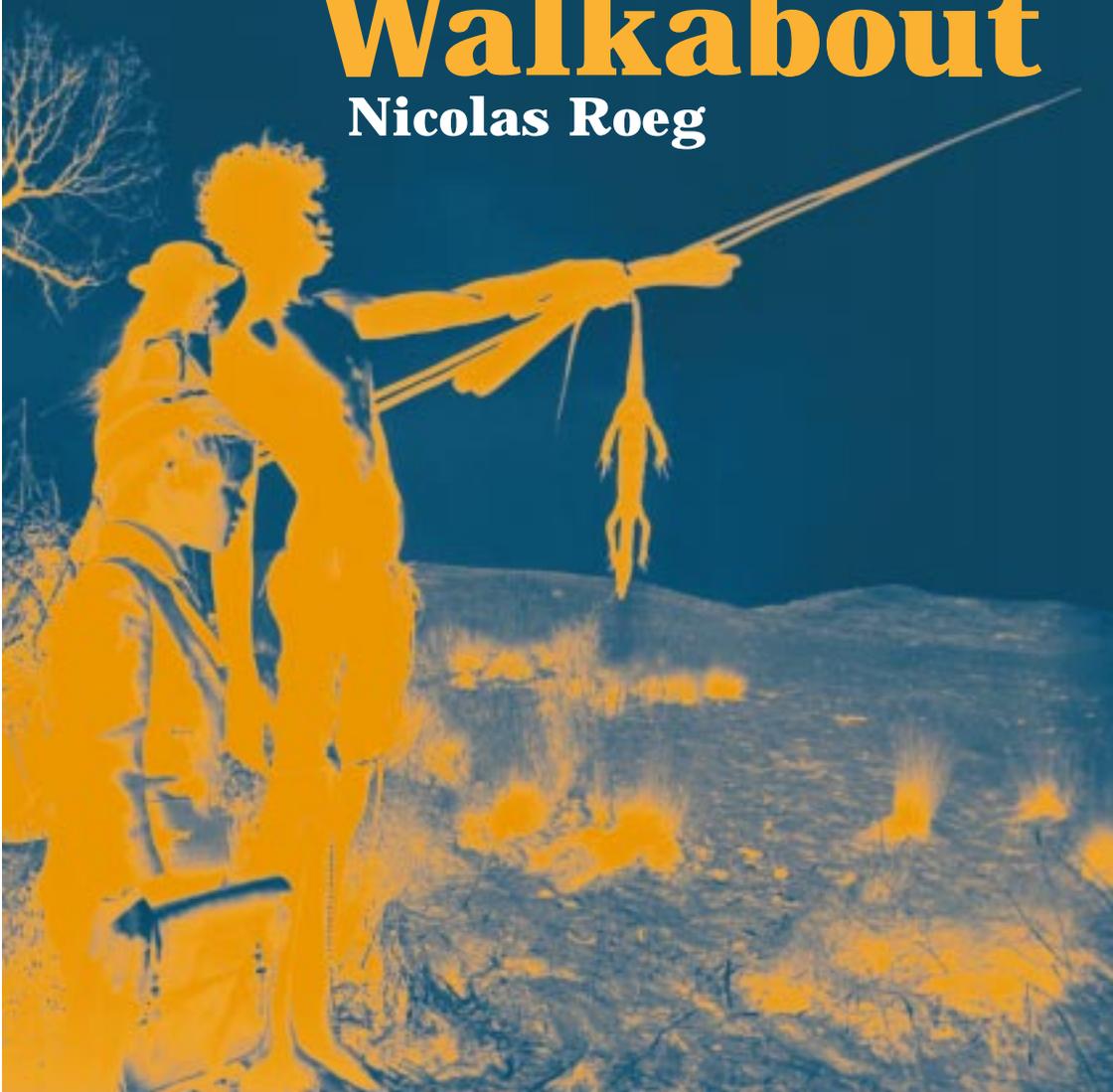
fresh film festival

study guide

by Brendan Maher

Walkabout

Nicolas Roeg



Walkabout

Director	Nicolas Roeg
Producer	Si Litvinoff
Associate Producer	Anthony J. Hope
Executive Producer	Max L. Raab
Writer	Edward Bond(screenplay) John Vance Marshall (novel)

Cast

Jenny Agutter	Girl
Luc Roeg	White Boy (as Lucien John)
David Gulpilil	Black Boy
John Meillon	Man
Robert McDarra	
Peter Carver	No Hoper
John Illingsworth	Young Man
Hilary Bamberger	
Barry Donnelly	Australian Scientist
Noeline Brown	German Scientist
Carlo Manchini	Italian Scientist

Crew

Original Music	John Barry
Cinematography	Nicolas Roeg
Film Editing	Antony Gibbs Alan Patillo
Production Design	Brian Eatwell
Art Direction	Terry Gough
Make Up	Linda Richmond

Introduction



Based on the book by James Vance Marshall, 'Walkabout' is director Nicolas Roeg's second film as a director and was made in 1970. The film details the journey of two Australian youths – a teenage girl and a young boy who are left to fend for themselves in the Australian Outback following the suicide of their father. Unable to survive practically in this harsh environment, they are befriended by an Aboriginal youth, himself on a ritualistic journey of discovery away from his tribe. The film chronicles the clash of the cultural meeting between the westernised Australians and the native boy. The film is radically different from the book and director Roeg takes the line of interpreting the spiritual awakening and damage which occurs from the meeting. Roeg's films often tend to follow the isolation experienced by characters due to personal crises or an environment they find themselves in. In the case of 'Walkabout', the arid Australian desert acts as a visual metaphor for the opportunity to start afresh, away from the spiritually empty value system we have developed in the west. The film is presented as a multi-layered, multi-textual story and is a rich and rewarding experience for the viewer.

1

Walkabout

Director, Nicolas Roeg, UK/Australia 1971, 95 mins

Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg)

2



Title

The title of the film comes from the book by James Vance Marshall.

In its original incarnation, the title specifically refers to the ritualistic tradition in aboriginal tribal culture in which a male youth, usually at the beginning of his teenage years, is sent from home to fend for himself. This period lasts for a number of months and the youth must use skills and abilities passed onto him by his elders in order to survive.

As well as this, Aboriginal culture holds the land in great esteem as a place where ancestors, during their lives, both interacted with and created the landscape in a mythical time known as the 'Dreamtime'. The youth on walkabout will utilise tribal myths to aid his understanding of where, for instance, water may be available, as a mythical tale will have recounted its existence in story form. Thus the youth uses both practical hunting and foraging skills as well as tribal myth to survive.

The title of book and film, in this case also refers to the two westernised youths isolated in the desert. They are forced to go on a walkabout across the desert without having any of the skills or stories available to them that an Aborigine would have.

Image

3

The image (left) was one which was used on the cover of the recent 'directors cut' of the video. The photograph features the three main characters in the film: the young boy, the teenage girl and the aboriginal youth. In the image, all the characters look from left to right across a desert plain.

Task

- (1) Who do you think is the person in charge of the group? What visual information is given to us in the image to suggest that this person is in charge of the group?*
- (2) Who is the best equipped to deal with desert landscape as presented in this image? What information in the photograph suggests this?*

Nicholas Roeg Biography

Nicholas Jack Roeg was born in London in 1928. He entered the film industry in the late 1940's as an editing apprentice and eventually became a camera operator in the late 1950s. In the early 1960s, he graduated to director of photography and, in this area, worked with directors Richard Lester (Petulia), Francois Truffaut (Fahrenheit 451), and Roger Corman (Masque of the Red Death). He started a second career as director in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He shared the director credit with Donald Cammell on the controversial Performance (1970), which the producers hoped would cash in on the fame of rock-star Mick Jagger in his acting debut. Warner Bros. balked at the completed film – a mix of sex, violence and identity crisis in gangland London and didn't release it for two years. It has now become a cult classic. Following 'Walkabout' (1971), Roeg worked with Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie in 'Don't Look Now' (1973) and David Bowie in 'The Man Who Fell To Earth' (1976). Roeg is known for a cinematic style that reveals his uniquely off-kilter view of the world, expressed through fragmented, dislocated images and a highly original yet strangely accessible approach to narrative. Nicolas Roeg's wife is actress Theresa Russell who has starred in five of her husbands films including Track 29 (1987) which also featured Gary Oldman. In recent years, Roeg has lost favour with critics, with much of his work being for made-for-TV movies or series.

4



Watching The Film

The Story

The film opens with a series of urban images, the girl in school, the boy in a school playground and various images of city life. We then see them at home in their apartment. The film cuts abruptly to a desert where the family: father, daughter and son are on a journey. The father stops the car and decides that they should eat. The girl sets up a picnic, the little boy plays nearby and the father waits in the shade of the car. The father takes a gun and begins firing at his two children. They run for cover as he continues firing. From their cover, the girl sees their father take a petrol canister and set the car alight and then shoot himself in the head. The girl, confused by the situation, attempts to salvage some food and returns to her brother, telling him that their father has told them to 'go on ahead'. They are now on their own.

The girl takes control, attempting to continue with a semblance of normality, following the incident. She makes food and prepares for night in the desert. The little boy seems oblivious to their predicament but we know that he understands something is wrong when he says 'we don't have any water, do we?' Her answer - 'we do have lemonade' - shows us how ill equipped they are for survival.

The children remain in their school outfits and carry school bags, despite the heat. A radio provides them with some contact with the outside world. They climb to the top of a hill, hoping to get their bearings, but mistakenly identify a shimmering desert expanse for the sea and travel towards it. They are lost.

5



Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg)

The heat of the sun takes its toll. They get burned and grow tired. Native animals scurry across the arid land. Both girl and boy try to keep going. She carries him. They stop and rest at a tree, finding water and fruit which sustains them. Aware that they have some food and they wait at the tree for the night.

In the morning, the girl finds that the water has all but dried up and the desert birds have eaten the trees' fruit. They still decide to stay at the tree hoping the water will well up again. They rest listlessly in the heat.

The figure of a near-naked teenage aboriginal boy comes over the hill. He is hunting for food. They meet. He attempts to talk to them. The girl is afraid. The aborigine walks away. They run after him knowing that he may be able to find water. The little boy communicates with him through a crude sign language and they return to the dried up water-hole and suck up water through a reed-like plant. Realising that they have a better chance of survival with him, they follow him.

The aborigine leads them through the desert, hunting and gathering food which they cook on an open fire. The boy is adept at killing and scavaging for food. Of the animals he kills, he utilises as much as possible of the carcass for food, weapons or tools. Both boys manage to communicate, but the girl is more reticent. She is aware of their difference. In play however, a sense of fun allows all three to bond a little closer. There is an however an unspoken awareness of their sexuality between both teenagers which is maintained through eye contact.

6

They travel on, the boy and girl, unsure of their destination, but aware that their is a now a possibility of survival if they stay with the aborigine. They reach lush vegetation, walk by tribal drawings on a rockface. Both boy and girl draw aboriginal markings on their faces and arms.

In a flat desert area, in a near comic aside, a group of meteorologists man a weather station. The only female in the group is the object of much attention from the all male crew. Their attention is drawn away from her by an escaping weather balloon.

Returning to the central story, the girl swims naked in a pool as the two boys hunt and prepare food. They now seem to have become a family. Out on his own, the aborigine boy comes upon a white woman who propositions him. He ignores her and returns to the boy and girl, who have missed this encounter.

Again in an aside from the central narrative, we follow the white woman back to a homestead, where a group of aborigines are engaged in making plaster statues for the tourist market.

Returning again to the central story, the trio reach a homestead. The girl, realising that there may be people inside, runs to the house and finds it disused, with shallow graves nearby. The aborigine boy is

unmoved at reaching this 'civilisation'. A tension develops between the teenagers – she sets up home from what has been left behind in the house – he aware that she is retreating from his world.

The boy and the aborigine search the surroundings. The aborigine alone again, sees some white hunters killing a water buffalo. At the house, the teenagers have become estranged and the aborigine leaves.

Returning later, painted in desert ochres, he performs a dance (possibly a mating ritual) outside the house. The girl, frightened, stays inside for protection, having no understanding of what is going on. The dance continues into the evening. The girl is happy when her little brother returns – he may offer her some protection.

The aborigine grows tired and both whites look on nonplussed by his activities. The girl decides that they will go on alone. In the morning, after cleaning themselves and discussing what they will do when they get home, they come upon the aboriginal boys' body hanging in a tree, dead.

They now follow the road and arrive at a small empty mining town. The first white person they meet acts strangely to them and he tells them to go further down the road to a restaurant.

In the final section of the film, we flash forward to the girl, now a woman greeting her husband as he comes home from work. As he idly chats about work, her mind drifts back to her time with her brother and the aboriginal boy as they swim together in the water pool. A voice-over speaks the words of poet A.E. Houseman: of 'blue-remembered hills' ... 'where I went and cannot come again.'



Looking At The Film

The director comments on the film

“I’ve got a lot of children, and I’ve been tremendously conscious each time of this question of identity and destiny. It wasn’t the visual side of the book at all. It was that here were two people – two people in effect, since the little boy 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 off to their own separate destinies, through the odd placement of identity, the identity that other people had put on them. The girl came nearly to the point where she could have changed, but then in one moment, when they see the road, she slipped all the way back, tumbled back into the mould. So nearly ... and there was still doubt in her right at the end of the film.”

Quote from: ‘The Films of Nicolas Roeg’ by Neil Sinyard

Discussion

8

- (1) In the above quote, the director is suggesting that he presented the story as a love story between the two teenagers. Their developing love is thwarted by the expectations of both their individual cultures. What evidence is in the film that would lead us to believe that love was developing between them?*
- (2) The idea of a pre-ordained destiny is central to many of Roeg’s films. How does he suggest the destiny or life path of both the white children and the aborigine? Is there a point in the film where their destinies may, in fact, change and go on another path.*
- (3) Roeg says that the girl slips back into her pre-ordained mould when they see the road. What other evidence (in the scene when they settle in the disused house) backs up this view?*

Roeg was upset that the film received an ‘AA’ certificate in Britain, which excluded a young audience. He stated: “I showed the film to a class of seven and eight year-olds who didn’t have any worry or fear about certain aspects of it because they hadn’t that in their experience and so they over looked it. And I had tried to construct ‘Walkabout’ in such a way that children could enjoy it on the level that was designed for them, while adults would appreciate it on another level ...”

Discussion

- (1) What aspects of the film would have concerned the British Film Censor in 1970? Do you think that these concerns are justified?*
- (2) The director points out that the film could be seen by a child on one level and by an adult on another. How do you think a child of seven would regard the film? What would he or she see in the film? What viewpoint would an adult take of the film?*

Book and Film

Marshall's book (which Edward Bond adapted as a screenplay) is radically different in some ways from the film. Below is a list of changes made in the adaptation.

Book

The children are survivors of a plane crash in the outback.

The children are from the southern part of America.

The lost children are called Peter and Mary. They call the aborigine boy 'Darkie'.

The Aborigine boy dies because he believes that the girl has seen the 'spirit of death' within him

The book ends with the pair coming upon another Aboriginal family who show them the way to a town.

Film

The children are left stranded in the desert following the suicide of their father.

The children are Australian

The children remain nameless throughout

The Aborigine dies (perhaps) because the girl refuses his advances or he may have seen a premonition of his death in the killing of the water buffalo.

The film ends with the pair arriving in a town and being disregarded despite their plight. An epilogue shows the girl, older, remembering her time with her brother and the aboriginal boy.

Task

(1) These are significant changes in adaptation. Taking each of the above, can you say whether the changes made alter the emphasis of the film in contrast to the book?

(2) In the film, we see the action from the point of view of the two white children. In the book, both the Westernised and the Aboriginal point of view are taken into account. Write a storyline for the film which would take the aborigines point of view. You could include his travels through the outback before he meets the children, his reaction to them, his feelings for the girl, why he decides to perform the mating ritual and his decision to commit suicide. Use the information in the film to construct this storyline.

Montage

This term is taken from the French word *monter* – to assemble. In film-making montage refers to the editing of the film.

For simplicity we can reduce the idea of montage to two trains of thought:

(1) Narrative Montage

In classic Hollywood film-making, images are cut together in order that we infer narrative or story information from them. Each image in a sequence feeds the next image with an inferred meaning, that the audience deduces.

Imagine we are watching a film and we see a static shot of a carrot lying in the grass. The next shot is of a rabbit, the next the carrot again and lastly we see the rabbit move towards the camera and then out of frame.

A narrative is created here. We feel that the rabbit is firstly, looking at the carrot, even though they do not appear together in frame in our sequence, and we feel that the rabbit is moving towards the carrot. Despite the fact that the rabbit and carrot do not occupy the same space and time in the frame, we connect the images together because of the way they have been assembled. Furthermore, we may take a further leap and infer that the rabbit is about to eat the carrot. We create our own connection.

10

(2) Expressive Montage

This type of editing is all about the film-maker encouraging us to make that further leap, beyond the narrative leap and into the more emotional and psychological inferences that may be drawn from an assemblage of images.

For example, we see the images of a famine stricken African country where a group of emaciated natives walk weakly by. This is directly followed by the image of a heavy Irish boy at a fast food outlet, eating an ice-cream and playing with a toy figure from 'The Lion King' that came free with his meal.

We can take various inferences from the way these images are assembled. We make the connections. First of all, the Irish boy is eating a desert while the people in the famine stricken land do not have food for even the most basic meal. Secondly, our emotional response could be our upset that we westerners have so much and that the people in the famine stricken land have so little. An intellectual response might refer to the connection between the toy from the 'Lion King' in which a corporation has utilised the culture of Africa as a means to make an film/toy to make a profit from, with none of this money going to the people who are from this culture and are hungry.

In expressive montage, two unconnected images allow us to construct a deeper meaning, than just that of detailing a storyline.

More information: Find info on Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein and Martin Scorsese's editor Thelma Schoonmaker.

Narrative Montage – ‘Walkabout’

In the sequence of the film, when the aborigine first appears, we are initially presented with the image of the little boy looking up. The film then cuts to the silhouette of the aborigine coming over the sand. We instantly infer that the boy has seen the aborigine and this is proven correct when they meet.

Expressive Montage – ‘Walkabout’

There is a sequence in the film where the three soon after they meet, play in a tree. These shots are interspersed between shots of a group of aboriginal children playing in the car in which the white children’s father died.

Various connections can be made by examining this sequence. Are the white children beginning to react naturally to their environment, just as the aborigines do, and not trying to impose a set of rules on the natural world as the girl has tried to do?

Does the fact that the children are playing in a tree (a naturally growing object) and that the aborigines are playing in a destroyed car (man made object) suggest the ultimate victory of the natural world over the man-made?

At it’s most basic, does the sequence (and the film) suggest that man-made mass produced objects and western cultural traits will be rendered irrelevant by the power of a natural environment? Take into account the ending of the film in this case.

11

Task

Find three more examples of expressionistic montage in the film and offer meanings for them.

Sound and Music

Roeg carefully constructs a soundtrack in the same way as the film has been edited. In the opening sequence of the film, we are given a disorienting soundtrack which includes music from Stockhausens’ ‘Hymnen’, snippets from a radio show, Aboriginal digeridoo music and noises from the bustling city. These sounds serve to emphasise the discordant nature of city life and reflect themes that come later in the film. The sounds, connected to the images place a new texture over the film which again alters the meaning of this sequence.

Task

Pick out a moment in the film where unconnected sound and images are placed together and assess why they are placed in such a way.

Contrasting imagery

In order to set up a deliberate contrast between the westernised man made world, and the natural aboriginal world, Roeg sets up a series of contrasting images which are included throughout the film. Here are some of them.

Westernised

Food is pre-packed or prepared.

Clothing and possessions are kept, despite being a hindrance or having no relevance

The radio and school are used as sources of learning or information

Food is killed but not fully utilised or killed for sport.

The soundtrack features a collection of discordant sounds (in the city sequence)

Sexuality or love is a commodity or a bartering tool.

Natural

Food is found at it's source when needed.

Clothing is unnecessary, given the heat of the desert. Possessions or tools are kept because they relate to needs created by the environment

Information is handed down or discovered as needed.

Food is killed and utilised as fully as possible.

The music is orchestrated to give a sense of wonder to the environment.

Sexuality or love is a naturally developing state.

12

Task

(1) *In the film the westernised children pass over into a more natural state at various points. Using some of the contrasts above, can you identify in the film, at what points these events happens?*

(2) *Can you pick out other contrasting images within the film?*



Religious imagery in the film

The film contains various Christian religious inferences listed below:

Judas: The father commits suicide – has he betrayed his family?

Adam and Eve: Do the teenagers take on the state of the original Old Testament family. Is the tree with the fruit, where they first encounter each other, a reference to this?

The Devil: A snake appears in the fruit tree while the girl sleeps.

The Garden Of Eden: Does the landscape take on the form of a paradise during the film?

Hell: Is the city depicted as hell or is the desert depicted as hell? Is the quarry with its disused vehicles (in the mining town) a reflection of this?

Moses: Is the Aboriginal boy leading his people through the wilderness?

The Tower of Babel: Does the inability to communicate between the aborigine and the white children refer to this? Does the city with its discordant noises more correctly reflect this?

Jesus: (1) Is the Aboriginal boy a Christ-like figure who offers the white children a glimpse of salvation through a natural way of living and sacrifices himself at the end of the film? (2) The aboriginal boy hangs himself in a cruciform shape, is this a reference to Christ?

Task

(1) *Take all the above views and assess whether the images and sounds presented in the film refer to the implied Christian imagery or stories.*

(2) *Can you see any other connections?*

For More Information

Feineman, Neil: *Nicolas Roeg* (Twayne Pub., 1979)

Izod, John: *The Films of Nicolas Roeg – Myth And Mind* (St. Martins Press, 1992)

Lanza, Joseph: *Fragile Geometry – The Films, Philosophy and Misadventures of Nicolas Roeg* (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1989)

Salwolke, Scott: *Nicolas Roeg, Film By Film* (McFarland & Company, 1993)

Sinyard, Neil: *The Films of Nicolas Roeg* (1991)

This Study Guide © Fresh Film Festival, 2001
Walkabout Images courtesy of EuroLondon Films
Design Pól Ó Cuilleanáin

in association with

