This chapter considers the death of animals in the novels and film adaptations of *Wake in fright* (1961/1971) and *Red Dog* (2001/2011). Both texts have several things in common: they are set in Australian mining towns – in *Wake in fright* it is Bundanyabba, a fictional town with echoes of Broken Hill, New South Wales, and in *Red Dog* it is Dampier in the Pilbara region of Western Australia – and in both the death of animals is central to the narrative: in *Wake in fright* it is the massacre of kangaroos and in *Red Dog* it is the death of a dog from strychnine poisoning. *Red Dog*, written by Louis de Bernières, is a collection of stories based on an Australian kelpie known as Red Dog who famously wandered throughout mining towns in the Kimberley district of Western Australia. Kenneth Cook’s novel *Wake in fright* tells the story of what happens to John Grant, a young schoolteacher, en route from his outback post to a summer holiday in Sydney which he never reaches. Instead, he experiences what has been described as ‘an orgiastic weekend of blind drunkenness, gambling, male rape and savage kangaroo hunting’ (O’Loughlin 2009).

A recent scholarly article suggests that the kangaroo massacre in the film of *Wake in fright* is ‘a surrogate for the actual historical massacres of Australia’s Indigenous peoples’ (Docker 2010, 61), while in

an interview the director of *Red Dog* suggests that his film, although ostensibly about a dog, is ‘about the people and what the dog did to the people’ (Pomeranz 2011). In both of these accounts the animals’ lives, and their deaths, are obscured. As Mary Allen suggests, ‘metaphorical far outnumber the literal animals in literature’ (Allen 1983, 6). In light of Derrida’s suggestion that ‘metaphor always carries its death within itself’, the common critical approach in textual studies to metaphorise nonhuman animals may well contribute to a cultural elision of living animals (Derrida 1982, 271). Susan McHugh, following Derrida’s work in ‘The animal that therefore I am’, points out: ‘nonhuman traces serve as deconstructive elements that betray human attempts at self-representation, and ultimately elaborate the logic of substitution through which the animal’s sacrificiality (its real and representational consumption) supports the human’ (McHugh 2011, 9). A consideration of elements of the textual strategies of the *roman à clef*, the novel with a key, which provides traces of culturally contentious or secret matters through its generic capacity to conceal and yet simultaneously to reveal, opens up further ways to read the representations of animal death in *Wake in fright* and *Red Dog*. The excavation undertaken in this paper of the textual deaths of Red Dog and of the hunted kangaroos brings to the surface animal matters embedded in these texts: deviation and disappearance, shame and shamelessness, and vested and invested interests.

*Wake in fright*

The novel *Wake in fright* became a bestseller when it was published in Australia and the United Kingdom in the 1960s but it failed to sustain long-term critical interest. The film version of *Wake in fright*, although gaining critical acclaim and being chosen for the Cannes Film Festival as the official Australian entry in 1971, was neither a box office success in Australia, nor in America or Europe where it was released under the title *Outback*.¹ On its initial release critics called it ‘violent realism’, and

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¹ There was one exception: ‘The only place that *Wake in fright* worked at the box office was Paris, where it ran for months in one cinema in an English print, with French subtitles’ (Galvin 2009).
suggested it ‘will shock and disgust and trigger off tidal waves of indignation from those who still believe our outback is the backbone of the nation’ (Galvin 2009). On its re-release 40 years later, in a digitally restored format, film critic David Stratton called it ‘a great milestone in Australian cinema history’ and both he and film critic Margaret Pomeranz agreed it shows ‘something that Australia embraces as part of its ethos, this hard drinking, wild mateship . . . treating women badly’ (Stratton & Pomeranz 2009). Clearly the film makes strong connections with contested concepts of Australian identity. But what about the kangaroos? As John Simons notes, ‘perhaps no other animal is quite so closely identified with a country and a culture’, but this identification is fraught with the kinds of contradiction which are embedded in the film (Simons 2013, 181).

Deviation and disappearance

The narrative of *Wake in fright* is driven by deviation. Grant’s thwarted journey to Sydney for the long summer holiday becomes instead a journey into the unknown, starting with a drunken binge in and around a mining town called Bundanyabba, after he loses all his money in a two-up game held in a back room packed with sweaty, intoxicated men, mostly miners. Grant’s night out progresses to a drunken gathering at someone’s home where he meets alcoholic misfit Doc Tydon, a group of hard drinking mine workers, and the host’s daughter Janette, who Kate Jennings remarks ‘keeps a house that the *Women’s Weekly* would praise but who is remarkably free with her favours’ (Jennings 2009). At one point during the evening Janette leads Grant outside, into the bush, where she attempts to seduce him but instead, both a sexual ingénue and overcome by alcohol, Grant ‘rolled off her body and knelt in the scrub and vomited and vomited, painfully and noisily in abject humiliation’ (Cook 2001, 87). The other men’s attitudes to women (‘we’ve all had little episodes with Janette’ (Cook 2001, 92) is symbolised, in the film version, by a pregnant golden labrador about to give birth who has only just been acquired by Dick, one of the drunken miners. The men make sexual jokes in relation to the paternity of the as yet unborn puppies:
The CAMERA PANS dizzily 360 degrees around the room . . . three or four men . . . are gathered around a pregnant bitch arguing about the time of delivery . . .

TYDON: You the father?
The group roars with laughter.
JOE: No chance. He only does it to sheep.²
More laughter.
TYDON: She’ll have pups by morning.
JANETTE comes in . . .
JOE: Who’s the father?
JANETTE: Don’t know. She’s a slut this little bitch. She’ll take anything.
The men laugh . . .
CUT to black. (Jones 1969, 57–58)

The next scene explicitly relies on metaphor:

During this period of black, we begin to hear the insistent buzz of a house-fly . . .

[Cut to next morning and close up of Grant waking up in Tydon’s bedroom]
CUT to what he sees: a corrugated tin ceiling from which hangs a twisted strip of sticky fly-paper. A recently embedded fly struggles to escape. (Jones 1969, 58)

This image of the fly clearly does not relate to any of the nonhuman animals in the film – it is a metaphor for Grant’s predicament, an instance of what McHugh refers to as ‘the metaphorical animal’s ways of inhabiting [texts] without somehow being represented therein’ (6). The final sentence of the preface in the screenplay states: ‘the film is about a moth, imprisoned in a world of light’ (Jones 1969). The metaphor of the moth demonstrates ‘the power to exclude that lies implicit in the power to name’ (Altman 1990, 504). The overt focus on the human, wrought in this way, provides insight into why the labrador disappears from the

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² A handwritten annotation next to this line in the script notes ‘different line for TV version’ (Jones 1969, 57)
story after this scene – for despite the proliferation of animals in the narrative they are ‘made to disappear’ (Baker 2000, 22).

Tydon, referring to his and Janette’s status as outsiders, says to Grant:

We break the rules, but we know more about ourselves than most people. We do research into the wilder shores of animality. No . . . not animality. Animals are not so lucky. (Jones 1969, 64)

What follows shows some of the unlucky animals. In the lead up to the drunken kangaroo massacre, the miners pick up Tydon and Grant and they all pile into the car with a greyhound shoved in the back to be used to chase and pull down kangaroos. Along the way a fox is shot at and killed from the vantage of a pub verandah while the publican, unperturbed, brings out the beers. There are diseased rabbits and rotting cow and/or horse carcasses scattered throughout the landscape (Jones 1969, 90).

In a scene which lasts eight minutes, actual footage of a kangaroo hunt is edited to appear as a hunt within the storyline of the film. The film’s director, staying faithful to Cook’s account of the kangaroo hunt, made an arrangement with professional shooters to film one of their hunts. But as he recounts:

From 6pm until 2am they were killing with great efficiency. Suddenly, around two in the morning, they started to miss and wound the animals. It was horrendous. The kangaroos were rolling around on the ground, and they were chasing the wounded kangaroos and putting them out of their misery. I learned that they had drunk a half of bottle of whiskey. Some of the footage that I shot was so repulsive, heinous, and bloody that there was no way I could even use it. (Monroe 2012, 2)

In the film and the novel the miners, Tydon and Grant are all hungover from the night before, but still drinking beer and getting drunk again. Early in the hunt the men come upon a mob of kangaroos. When a lone kangaroo moves toward the car the driver ‘yells like a madman’ and crashes the car into the animal. The injured kangaroo is not visible in the frame but its breathing and movement can be heard offscreen –
until Dick pulls out a knife and bends down, then silence. Tydon takes his knife and cuts off the animal’s testicles:

JOE (to Grant): Doc eats them, reckons they’re the best part of the roo.

DICK (to Grant): Haven’t you tried ’em Grant.
GRANT: No.
DICK: Better than oysters. Put lead in your pencil. (Jones 1969, 69)

As day turns into night they shout, drive like maniacs, shine spotlights on the animals, shoot, stab, eviscerate and skin the animals, and laugh and drink. The hunt culminates with Grant’s frenzied stabbing of an injured young kangaroo, urged on by the other men.

The film starts and ends with disclaimers:

All characters and events depicted in this film are fictitious. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cook, who worked in Broken Hill in the early 60s (as a radio journalist for the ABC), indicated that the story may well be more ‘real’ than the disclaimer suggests: ‘Cook told an interviewer that all of the characters of the novel were libelous recreations of actual people’ (Galvin 2009).

In contrast the ‘Producer’s note’ at the end of the film states that at least one ‘event’ is not fictitious:

The hunting scenes depicted in this film were taken during an actual kangaroo hunt by professional licensed hunters. For this reason and because the survival of the Australian kangaroo is seriously threatened, these scenes were shown uncut after consultation with the leading animal welfare organizations in Australia and the United Kingdom.

This statement, which not only seems to contradict the disclaimer at the start of the film, and which stands in stark contrast to the usual disclaimer that no animal was harmed in this film – instead stating that they were – may conceal more than it purports to reveal. The com-
bination of the main elements of this statement – calling the shooters professional, intimating an interest in animal conservation and stating that there was consultation with unnamed animal welfare organisations in two countries – creates a context of care that allows the brutality of the kangaroo deaths to be revealed and a potential for abnegation of responsibility, a potential for shamelessness.

In light of the real events that are shown – the brutal deaths of animals – it seems relevant that the context for the rest of the film is disguise. The humans, the town, the events are all presented under the thin veil of secrecy offered by the roman à clef which Cook’s comment, that he based the novel on real people, indicates. The back cover blurb on the 2001 reprint calls *Wake in fright* ‘a portrait of fear and loathing in Broken Hill’, not the fictional name, Bundanyabba, given in the novel. Certainly the novel has à clef elements. A central function of the roman à clef is that it conceals what is culturally sensitive or unacceptable, while revealing the same things to an ‘in the know’ or coterie audience who can identify people, places and events (Boyde 2009). For example, the genre was taken up by lesbian and gay writers at times when homosexuality was otherwise rendered a cultural secret and its practices considered shameful (Boyde 2010). In *Wake in fright* the disclaimer and the producer’s note indicate that there are layers of revelation and disclosure. For an ‘in the know’ reader they highlight the contradictory discourses surrounding, and affecting, these (iconic) native animals: ‘[A kangaroo] is simultaneously a wonderful thing and a nuisance. It is a national symbol and a piece of meat on a plate’ (Simons 2013, 103).

What may appear to some as deviant behaviour (the pleasure taken in the hunt and slaughter of animals and the emotional indifference of the hunters to their suffering) is displaced in the novel and film onto what at the time was (and possibly still is) more widely accepted as cultural deviation – an incident which occurs between Grant and Tydon after the kangaroo hunting episode.

**Shame and shamelessness**

Silvan Tomkin writes that: ‘Like disgust, [shame] operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both’ (Sedgwick 2003, 39). Does anyone feel any shame for any of what happens in *Wake in fright*? Grant is the only person who appears to feel
shame but it is not for the death of the animals. Instead his shame is linked to homosexuality – a sexual encounter with Tydon which in the film is visually linked to the hunt:

INT. TYDON’S BEDROOM NIGHT.
TYDON has switched on the light . . . The light is held so that it is shining into GRANT’S face, and he stands, hypnotized by it . . .
TYDON circles behind GRANT, as GRANT circled behind the little kangaroo, the camera matching the movement in the same way . . .
TYDON takes GRANT by the chin, tilting his head back and seizing his throat with the other hand. GRANT struggles . . .
GRANT gives up, and they are completely still, except for their exhausted breathing.
The music stops.
The overhead light is swinging gently, to and fro.
[Cut to next scene] TYDON’S BEDROOM DAY. (Jones 1969, 83)

As in so many other films in the decades prior to the 1970s, homosexuality is a present absence, inferred but not shown. Yet, for the protagonist of this film the homosexual encounter is a trigger that causes him initially to consider killing Tydon and then to turn the rifle on himself. Hidden from view – did it happen, was it mutual, was it rape as several critics claim (or does the gentle to and fro movement of the overhead light indicate otherwise?) – the secrecy of the sexual encounter between the two men moves the focus off the explicit representation of the kangaroo shoot. The massacre, like the roman à clef, both fiction and reality (real footage edited together with fictional film footage), is the only incident where Grant shows pleasure or excitement. At one point the novel reveals Grant’s thoughts on his companions who, despite (or perhaps more precisely because of) their drinking and their pleasure in killing animals, he seems to admire:

it was remarkable that two men like the miners would associate with [Tydon]. With all their faults they were men, and Tydon was a twisted, revolting creature’. (Cook 2001, 115)
Although for some critics the hunt is overwhelmingly ‘hard to watch’ (Docker 2010, 62), it is, I suggest, made easier by being displaced onto the secret of homosexuality where shame is contained in the protagonist. Shame about the death of animals is further deflected by the information in the ‘Producer’s note.’ Shame, as queer theorist Sally Munt (2008) points out, has a dimension of cultural politics.

Tomkins suggests that ‘the vicarious experience of shame, together with the vicarious experience of distress, is at once a measure of civilization and a condition of civilization’ (Sedgwick & Frank 1995, 162). Near the end of the novel, schoolteacher Grant discards the books, a symbol of civilisation, which he has been carrying in his suitcase. Shortly after, stumbling through the red dust landscape, he shoots a rabbit, takes out his knife and ‘slit[s] the skin around the neck and peel[s] it off the body like a glove’ before cooking and eating it. Grant’s only regret is that he wishes he ‘had thought to provide himself with salt’ (Cook 2001, 139).

Red Dog: vested and invested interests

Red Dog, written by Louis de Bernières, is a collection of stories based on the (deceased) real-life dog called Red Dog, an Australian kelpie known as the Pilbara Wanderer. The novel was made into a film of the same name which was released in 2011. Like Wake in fright, Red Dog is set in an outback landscape, the Pilbara region of Western Australia, home to extensive open cut mining operations run by the Rio Tinto mining group. It is also the area where mining magnate and wealthiest woman in the world Gina Rinehart, dubbed the Pilbara Princess, is establishing the Roy Hill mine. Like the glimmering red cliffs laden with iron-ore spotted from the air long ago by Rinehart’s father Lang Hancock, which for him held the promise of untold wealth, Red Dog shimmers on page and on screen – the question arises who profits from his life and his death?

Mining industries are currently running advertising campaigns which put a glossy spin on their industry depicting it as glamorous,

3 According to the Business Review Weekly’s (BRW) 2012 Rich 200 list.
in the outback vernacular mode, with promotional style shots of human/wildlife interactions and of ‘lifestyle’ activities such as rounding up cattle (the cattle industries also thrive in this region, providing stock for the contentious live animal export industry). Mining industry companies Rio Tinto, Woodside and Westrac partially funded the film, which was shot around the port town of Dampier, built in the early 1960s for the mining industries. Current mine workers were used as extras in the film. The CEO of Rio Tinto, commenting on their investment in Red Dog, calls it: ‘an exciting opportunity to showcase our industry, our people and the story of the Pilbara to the world’ (Screenwest 2010). Throughout the film there are many shots of the mining town and surrounds – mining equipment, open cut mine landscapes and mine workers are repeatedly shown, often with upbeat music on the soundtrack. Unlike the miners in Wake in fright, the miners in Red Dog look clean, happily hardworking and relatively sober.

On the outskirts of Dampier is a statue of Red Dog with a plaque which states it was ‘erected by the many friends he made during his travels’. As Stephen Miller points out, ‘dog memorials can be found scattered throughout Australia’ (Miller 2012, 36). Australian kelpies have several – Red Dog at Dampier, a bronze statue of a kelpie at Ardlethan in the Riverina (NSW) which claims to be the birthplace of the Australian kelpie (a mixture of strains of working collies and dingoes) and where the Kelpie Dog Festival is held each year. Another Australian kelpie statue is at Casterton in Victoria where a counter-claim was made that it was ‘the birthplace of the foundation bitch of the Kelpie breed’ with a statue erected outside the town hall (Miller 2012, 36). ‘The Australian Kelpie Muster’ is now held there each year with competitions such as Fattest Dog, Dog Most Like It’s Owner, and Kelpie Pinball – which suggest (to some) a fun family day (Pedigree Australian working dog muster 2012). But it is also about business, with a working dog auction held where dogs are bought and sold – since inception of the event, the auction has achieved over one million dollars in sales.

The film of Red Dog made much more for its investors – it was the highest-grossing Australian film of 2011, taking $21.3m, and the most popular local film since Australia (2008) (Bodey 2012). Red Dog was awarded Best Film at the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts awards 2011, and there are plans to develop Red Dog as a stage musical. Marketed as a ‘family film’, Red Dog offers a feel-good look at
the life of a dog who throughout the length of the film lies dying from a man-made poison widely used in the Pilbara region to kill wild dogs (Code of Practice 2009). It seems ironic that many of these so-called wild dogs are, like Red Dog, a mixture of the native dingo and imported breeds. Classified as pests, the state government of Western Australia allocates $14 million per annum to, in the words of the premier, ‘fight the wild dog issue’ which allegedly affects both the pastoral and mining industries (ABC Rural 2012; ABC Rural 2002).

**Deviation and disappearance**

The novel on which the screenplay is based has a linear structure, comprising a series of stories about Red Dog’s adventures, leading to a final chapter, ‘The last journey’, in which Red Dog, found on the roadside writhing in agony, is driven to the local police station while a vet is called. When it is discovered that the local vet is away, the policeman, Bill, decides he should shoot Red Dog who is ‘raddled with the poison’ (107). But the policeman can’t bring himself to pull the trigger – Red Dog is his ‘old and well-loved friend’ (105). Instead Red Dog’s friends ‘arrived one by one to take it in turns to hold onto him and quell the convulsions during the long hours until the vet’s arrival’ (108). Throughout the night they drink tea and reminisce about Red Dog’s life in the Pilbara and his journeys in search of his so-called ‘one true master’, John, who died in an accident when his bike hit a kangaroo (unlike the human and the dog, there are no sentimental stories on the death of this native animal). After being kept in a coma for two and a half days by the vet and administered anti-convulsant drugs every time the shaking and writhing started up, Red Dog seems to pull through. But the strychnine has caused brain damage and he cannot stand up, so one by one his friends say their goodbyes before the vet administers a fatal dose of morphine (108).

The film shows his death differently. It opens with truck driver Tom arriving at the outback pub where he sees a silhouette through opaque glass of a man with a gun in his hand and hears a voice saying ‘hold his bloody head still’. The structure of the film weaves the present tense of Red Dog’s last night with flashbacks of episodes in his life told by his friends, who instead of sitting with him gather in the hotel bar. Essentially these stories comprise scenes of Red Dog hitching rides, meeting

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John, John's romance with Nancy, John's accidental death and Red Dog's wandering in search of him.

At the end of his lectures, published as ‘The animal that therefore I am’, Jacques Derrida says ‘I can die, or simply leave the room’ (Derrida qtd in Wills 2009, 34). At the end of the film version of Red Dog, the eponymous protagonist does both – he leaves the room and shortly after he dies. The events leading to this moment, and the representation of his death, constitute a major deviation from de Bernières' novel. Following Derrida, David Wills refers to:

the space that opens once another being has turned its back, left the room, or died. A being is, indeed, by virtue of inhabiting that dorsal space, by being behind the being that has left it behind in order that it might be. It is in the space of the unknown, of what cannot be known, for presumptive knowledge about how a being is is precisely what prevents a being from being as it is. (Wills 2009, 41)

The film is made up from presumptive knowledge about Red Dog which I suggest prevents ‘a being from being as it is’, inserting instead human interpretation rendered as real. Like the book, in the film Red Dog’s ‘friends’ tell stories that are ostensibly Red Dog’s stories and which comprise the episodic narrative of the film. In a notable deviation from the novel, the friends literally turn their backs on the dying dog – they become so buoyed up by the stories they tell that they break into song and dance and fail to see Red Dog struggle to his feet and leave the pub by the back door.

Both the novel and film have disclaimers that, like those of Wake in fright, offer somewhat conflicting statements about what is real in the narrative. Like Wake in fright, the Red Dog disclaimers indicate roman à clef features, providing a veil over that which is culturally contentious:

The real Red Dog was born in 1971, and died on November 20th 1979. The stories I have told here are all based upon what really happened to him, but I have invented all of the characters, partly because I know very little about the real people in Red Dog’s life, and partly because I would not want to offend any of them by misrepresenting them. The only character who is ‘real’ is John. (de Bernières 2001)
De Bernières’ disclaimer in the author’s note is on the surface rather standard but the statement that the stories about the dog ‘are all based upon what really happened to him’ seems contradictory – how can an event happen to Red Dog that doesn’t depend on the participants involved in those events and the characters who represent them?⁴

Fiction combined with fact (although unverifiable by Red Dog himself, not only because he is dead but because he is a dog) and characters who are ‘real’ with inverted commas (de Bernières, not mine) are features of the roman à clef and this novel has à clef features – the ‘Author’s note’ is itself a key. Over the past 400 years writers have adopted the roman à clef for political or social commentary, disguising and simultaneously disclosing (to an ‘in the know’ reader) the identity of well-known people (Boyde 2010). Despite the cover the roman à clef affords, a number of the writers and/or publishers of romans à clef have been charged with libel. As readers ‘in the know’ (for example, from the field of animal studies) would understand, the majority of nonhuman animals are culturally positioned as outsiders, with all the associated implications of that status. Several of de Bernières’ stories in the novel reveal negative human impact on animals: Red Dog is badly injured falling off the back of a ute – as de Bernières notes, ‘these were common mishaps for Western Australian dogs’ (83) and Red Dog is found ‘dragging himself along the road’ with blood coming from bullet wounds in his haunch, shot by someone unknown (43). On the long journey to the vet ‘the men couldn’t help noticing how many kangaroos and wallabies had been hit by cars, and lay dead in horrible attitudes at the side of the tarmac’ (48). When one of the men says ‘they should do something about it’, his mate replies: ‘they jump fences . . . and anyway the farmers want them run over, right enough’ (48).

Like the film version of *Wake in fright*, the film *Red Dog* also has disclaimers:

No animals were harmed in the making of this motion picture. The animals featured in this production were handled with care and concern for their safety and wellbeing.

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⁴ I am indebted to my colleague Dr Alison Moore for this insight.
Is it for animal welfare reasons alone that, in the scene in which the miners drive Red Dog to the vet after he has been shot, there is no trace of what is known as ‘roadkill’ even though this is detailed in the novel? The figures in just one of Australia’s six states estimate that 2.55 million animals are killed by cars per year (Ramp 2004, 5). The vast numbers of animals injured and killed in this way and the lack of public interest causes ecologist Dan Lunney to raise the question of ‘whether driving in rural areas is a de-facto ritual of wildlife slaughter’ (Lunney 2012).

The episode described in the novel in which one of the miners in the car counts ‘ten [dead animals] in five k’s’ (48) on the roadside is changed in the film – the dead animals are erased and replaced with a pristine stretch of road alongside which an almost three kilometre iron ore train rolls purposefully by – a symbol of what the film’s director calls ‘the engine of Australia’ (Maddox 2011).

There is a further disclaimer at the end of the film: ‘The Red Dog film has been inspired by events, which may or may not have happened, but have become Pilbara Outback folklore. All the human characters in this film are invented, fictitious and imaginary.’

In the film version of Red Dog, his life and his death by strychnine poison, posited as potentially real according to ‘folklore’ and through the statement that only the human characters are fictitious, are simultaneously disclosed and hidden. This is effected not only through deviations from novel to film but also through the deflection of the disclaimer – no animals were harmed etc. which, like the disclaimer in Wake in fright, suggests a sense of cultural responsibility on the issue of animal welfare. In reality poisons such as strychnine and 1080 are routinely used to kill so-called feral animals. Any other animal who can’t read the warning signs posted in baited areas and who takes the bait becomes collateral damage – an open cultural secret.

**Shame and shamelessness**

Is there any sense of shame depicted in the film about the death of Red Dog from strychnine poisoning? It is a poison with no antidotes and which ‘results in muscular convulsions and eventually death through asphyxia or sheer exhaustion’, that is, after prolonged pain and suffering (Code of Practice 2009, 6).
In this film, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls ‘the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrol-
lable relationality’ is figured in terms that strike out the animal suffering and death (Sedgwick 2003, 37). The ‘uncontrollable relationality’ that might reasonably be caused by the shame of Red Dog’s death by man-
made poison (and could, for example, prompt a review of that wide-
spread method of killing ‘feral’ animals) instead creates a consolidation of conventional family values. The foregrounded (albeit sanitised) rep-
resentations of animal suffering and death remarkably become ‘feel-
good’ family entertainment.

This is what happens: although close to death, somehow Red Dog manages to get up and leave not only the room but the building, unseen by his friends. The camera follows his final journey which includes multiple shots of the enormous freight train carrying iron ore from the mines to the port (which Rio Tinto lent to the film crew for an entire day’s shoot). When the vet discovers he is gone, a search ensues and again mining apparatus is noticeably present in most of this sequence of shots: the port, a mining truck, the miners, huts and the miners. Red Dog is finally found lying dead at John’s gravesite, known in the film as ‘his master’, in a highly romanticised reunion of man and dog. (If Red Dog knew all along that John was dead and where his grave was, why did he go a-wandering in search of him?) Unlike the depiction of the mining town in Wake in fright, ‘with its sweltering heat, choking dust, swarming flies’ (Jennings 2009), in Red Dog the mining town comes out looking like a place of opportunity and renewal, where heterosexuality reigns supreme – most of the central mine worker characters find love, marriage and even children, and the regeneration extends to a Red Dog look-alike kelpie puppy given to Nancy by her new beau Tom whom she first meets in the bar while Red Dog is dying in the back room.

The director Kriv Stender’s view that ‘a dog is just a dog and that’s what I loved about the idea of the movie . . . it was really more about the people and what the dog did to the people’ contributes to the domination of the human relationships in the film’s narrative, exemplified by the filmic separation of dog and humans in the scenes which constitute the present of the film – the events in the bar while the dog lays dying (Pomeranz 2011).

Certainly the song Red Dog’s friends are singing and dancing to in the bar reveals that the film is all about the humans, and the mining:
Way out west where the rain don’t fall
Got a job with a company drilling for oil
And I’m never gonna leave
Living and a-working on the land
What a change it’s been
From working that nine to five
How strange it’s been
At last I get the feeling that I’m really alive. (The Dingoes 1973)

Red Dog leaves the room precisely at the moment when the singing and dancing in the bar reaches a crescendo. He is unseen by his so-called friends who all have their backs to him. Although this moment is structured as celebratory – the rousing music, the joyful stories, the romance of the new love for Nancy, the human bonds and friendship forged – for those in the know about the repercussions of such cultural elisions of animals the scene becomes something quite different. It takes on the nature of a wake – with, I suggest, the shamelessness of a wake held while a body is still living and breathing – it is a ‘wake in fright’.

Postscript: Koko, the dog who starred in Red Dog, died in December 2012 of congestive heart disease, aged seven.

Works cited


