Family Demons: The Ghost as Domestic Inheritance

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> *Low cinematic genres – (as Clover, Williams and Robin Wood and others) have often pointed out – often handle explosive social material that mainstream cinema is reluctant to touch.*
>
> *— Joan Hawkins*[1]

Can you make a film about the aftermath of incest and child abuse and its effect on three generations of women in the same family? Would this film contain an inherited ghost running through the narrative that could represent repressed feelings of "colonial" guilt on another level? Could this film prick the conscience of a nation that might be shuddering in silence for all its past sins? Would you get funding for this film from an Australian funding agency if you didn't have a track record? Would this very serious film fill cinemas – especially Australian ones? Could you get international profile actors to star in your film? Or would Australian film actors like Gracie Otto, Susie Porter, and Wendy Hughes be interested enough to become involved and, moreover, respect your vision? And, last, but most importantly, as an emerging filmmaker, could you be guaranteed complete control over your creative decisions?

The answer to all those questions is almost certainly a big "no." Espe-

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cially in the case of a film that conjures up feelings that hark back to the land grabbing and genocide that have been sanitised by the "TV period drama" template. Visions that come to mind of bonnets and petticoats, ruggedly handsome adventurers, and stagecoaches offer us a racially particularised view of this decidedly unromantic era.[2] The kind of film that is still made in spite of all those adverse conditions is the kind of "heroic" filmmaking that we now recognise under the auspices of "Bad Cinema." I have deemed it "heroic" as I believe that great courage and determination is needed to see such a project through – usually for next-to-no budget.

This paper will discuss *Family Demons*, an ultra-low-budget horror film written and directed by the Canadian-born, Adelaide filmmaker Ursula Dabrowsky. As an avid viewer of horror films, Dabrowsky loved the genre and had wanted to make a work about the aftermath of family abuse, so she decided to fuse the two together. Although on the surface a genre piece, complete with a teenage girl as the central character, Dabrowsky has shifted the concept of her horror film toward a study of inherited behaviour, heavily relying on the motif of a monster mother and spectral grandmother. I would like to discuss this film within the boundaries of its captive ghost – the ghost of domestic violence – and also touch on another reading: the ghost of inherited guilt within a nation. I will be drawing on a theory of psychoanalytic cryptonomy as investigated by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok,[3] as well as socio-political interpretations of Australian history put forward by Ross Gibson.[4]

It is widely apparent with storytelling that a person from outside a certain culture will possess a comparatively unblinkered view and can thus tell stories more lucidly than the locals can. If we look at *Family Demons* with a view to national identity we are presented with a story told from just such a viewpoint, one that is unfettered by either past associations or censored accusations. Hence, some uncomfortable ghosts have been given free reign.

Family Demons is a contemporary story of three women that addresses the horror of learned behaviour and repeated actions of female aggression, all contained within a classic horror template.

"It's a dangerous world out there, very, very dangerous," says Billie's mother, for Billie's biggest dangers, according to her mother, reside *outside*. But *inside*, in the house and the psychological space of the unconscious, a more grotesque and violent monster is circling: the ghost of domestic inheritance. A ghost that has been handed down from generation to generation, encoded in silence and destined to bury and repress wrong doings. But Billie's mother could also be commenting on the pitfalls of making an independent film with no support from any government funding agencies

in Australia, especially in the small but culturally active city of Adelaide, where this film is set.

> The writer Salman Rushdie, having once visited Adelaide for its celebrated Writer's Week, wrote a piece in the British *Tatler* describing Adelaide as "a kind of Amityville, an ideal setting for a Stephen King novel or horror film … sleepy conservative towns are where those things happen." What was it he sensed beneath the charm of Adelaide's wide, ordered streets, grand Georgian and Victorian buildings and symmetrical leafy green squares? … When Salman Rushdie watched nightfall in Adelaide, it was not a soft velvet cloak of harmony that he saw descend on this city.[5]

South Australia's capital Adelaide, also known as the city of churches, is a quiet, culturally aware place that is renowned for beautiful scenery, majestic landscapes, quality food and wine, and an enviable lifestyle. The state's governments have spent millions on advertising the state as a well-kept secret, and only a visit to the region will disclose its hidden treasures. But this presents a paradox. For lurking here is a dark, encrypted "other" – a silent but deadly twin. Just below the surface of the city, hidden by the majestic parklands and stately buildings, there lies a horrible history. As evidenced by the recent Snowtown "bodies in the bank" murders, Adelaide has been the site of a disproportionate number of strange and macabre murders and horrific child abductions, undignified and unsolved. These ghosts of ghastly crimes have populated and mythologised its history. They loom large and will not leave, continuing to prey on the fears and imagination of a population that walks in their shadow every day. On Australia Day, 1966, the three Beaumont children were taken from a suburban beach. In the early 1970s, two little girls, Kirsty Gordon and Joanne Ratcliffe, were stolen from the Adelaide Oval cricket ground. Later in the decade, the Family, most of who are still at large and known to police, abducted boys and tortured them in a cultish ritual that left the city shocked and angered. And at the same time, like an opposite side of a battered coin, two friends from an outer suburb were picking up girls from bus stops and violently killing them before dumping their bodies in the empty plains near Truro. To get to Truro from Adelaide, you drive on the Sturt highway, named after Charles Sturt the explorer. The passing landscape, sometimes picturesque, sometimes barren, contains a strange unease, as though something really bad has happened here. This land is a site of murders, in both distant and recent history, and feeds into the continuing mythology of Adelaide – the murder capital of Australia.

Gibson, in his book *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* writes:

> Most cultures contain prohibited or illicit spaces but no-go zones are especially compelling within *colonial* societies. By calling a place ominous and bad, citizens can admit that a pre-colonial kind of "sav-

> agery" lingers inside the colony even though most of the country has been tamed for husbandry and profit.[6]

He also bases his badland theory around a horror stretch of road in Queensland, a now-unused highway joining Rockhampton and Mackay, a place so laden with ghosts of past crimes that there are warnings against going there. Here, strange murders have been committed, usually of itinerants, but Gibson uncovers a bloody history that has shadowed this zone and is linked back to the time of the first pioneers. A strange malaise of guilt, violence and dislocation has haunted this place, filling it with dread and unease. This "ghost," one that stems from the wrongdoings of pioneers, the Native Police Corps, and first settlers, pervades the country and has seeped into the psyche of the nation.

Although lauded in schoolbooks as having been founded by "free settlers" who moved peacefully into the area, Adelaide's ghosts come from the same dark history as Queensland's. But through these false histories Adelaide schoolchildren were duped for many years. Growing up in a place that was "free," I thought that venturing interstate was like taking a trip to the murky depths of the unknown. Convict chains would suddenly rattle in a stark reminder at the border crossing that I was living in the safest state. These childhood ghosts, shared by thousands of Adelaide children after being given compromised versions of the truth from their government-endorsed textbooks, echo colonial ideas about place – the untamed land around the settlement is dangerous. But perhaps these childhood memories serve as a warning that nothing comes for free: there will eventually be a price, especially for silence. Australia's most famous badland has been the "dead centre" of the outback, a place closer to Adelaide than anywhere else. As Gibson tells us, Sturt's South Australian journals depict an unruly, unsettling landscape without solace, and thus Sturt becomes the consummate myth-maker, manipulating his reader's anxieties as he documents the land's eeriness and, with that, the narratives of violence – how the land was won – until the crimes are erased or carried out for the good of the nation.

At the time of the journals, these insights from prominent explorers held great interest, and also, as Gibson comments, were needed to rationalise the behaviour that was imposed in claiming the land. But now, re-examined and exposed as invasion and expropriation, we are trying to confront it. But still the ghost remains, lingering in a country trying to come to terms with its cruel and inexcusable colonial foundation. Crimes that remained silent for a century are now haunting the nation both communally and personally as we try to reconcile the sins of the past.

The bush poet Barcroft Boake writes:

> Out on the wastes of the Never Never –
> That's where the dead men lie!
> There where the heat-waves dance forever –
> That's where the dead men lie!
> That's where the Earth's loved sons are keeping
> Endless tryst: not the west wind sweeping
> Feverish pinions can wake their sleeping –
> Out where the dead men lie! [7]

Boake, born in Sydney in 1866, turned his back on city life and lived in the bush, assisting a surveyor before becoming a drover. When he finally returned to Sydney for family reasons in 1892, he went missing and was found eight days later, hanging by the neck from a stock whip. Who did Boake write this poem about? As a child, my schoolbooks told me it was convicts and contractors working for rich land grabbers, but perhaps Boake, living on the frontier, had seen something else.

Gibson defines a myth in this way:

> A myth is a popular story that highlights contradictions which a community feels compelled to resolve narratively rather than rationally, so that citizens can get on with living.[8]

Insofar as it can inhabit a vast country, this ghost can inhabit a smaller, particular area – a domestic space.

Dabrowsky presents her story as myth, an untold chapter of yet another horrible crime committed in this place, finally rising above the surface.

As *Family Demons* is quite recent, having had only a limited number of public screenings at the time of writing,[9] I will briefly introduce its characters. Billie (played by Cassandra Kane), a teenage girl, lives with her mother in a quiet, suburban street in a working-class suburb in Adelaide. Her mother (played by Kerry Reid), known only as 'Ma,' a violent alcoholic and a victim of sexual abuse, holds her captive within the confines of the house. Billie catches glimpses of the outside world through the window, and often sees the boy next door – Alex (played by Alex Rafalowicz) – who tries to engage her in some sort of conversation, which she shrinks away from. The film's official synopsis is: "Inspired by real events, *Family Demons* is a psychological horror film about an abused teenage girl who murders her alcoholic mother and is horrified to discover that the mother's vengeful spirit returns to haunt her."[10]

Family Demons is set within the confines of a house, originally haunted by the ghost of the grandmother, who we learn turned a blind eye towards her husband's sexual abuse of her daughter, and then beat the daughter senseless for speaking up. Complicit within her husband's crime,

this psychologically abusive behaviour was then inherited by the daughter, Billie's mother, who, when Billie was born, continued the line of psychological abuse under the guise of protecting her child. This "protection" involved committing acts of sadistic cruelty such as starving her and chaining her to the laundry trough in order to keep her away from the outside world, the world where bad things will happen. In other words, Billie's mother has projected the blame for the tragedy of her life onto Billie, and has unconsciously forced her daughter into silence by holding her prisoner.

For Billie, the world *outside* the house is not only populated by the constructs of every mother's fear of what may happen to her child, but, worse still, this *constructed outside* is a repetition of events that have become repressed memories from her mother's childhood: speeding cars, burning summer sun, and preying rapists. We learn these events via a dream sequence very early in the film. This scenario is in exact opposition to the outside world as presented in its South Australian counterpart *Bad Boy Bubby* (1993).[11] Where Bubby is embraced and nurtured by the kind and understanding world outside his house, Billie's *outside* is to be avoided at all costs, offering destruction and demise at every turn.

Billie's *inside*, the domain of the house, is dominated by the alcoholic and violent nature of her mother, but ruled by the gatekeeper of any victim recovery – the grandmother's ghost. This ghost, encrypted within the house, and even more horribly in Billie's mother, is deeply in control; Billie's mother is no longer a woman who can function normally, but someone who has had no chance to grieve – frozen emotionally at the very instant that she was abused by both her parents. This incident, represented by the ghost, is deeply buried, never to be set free.

As Jacques Derrida writes:

> The inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as* dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, intact in any way save as living.[12]

This "grandmother ghost" of the past contained within this house continues to inhabit and haunt the space, like the ghost of the crimes of our country's pioneers, haunting the landscape, the settlements, the cities. Cryptically incorporated into the nation and borne from violence and a lack of proper mourning, it becomes representational of the hundreds of thousands of aboriginal people slaughtered for their land.

We wonder why there is a bad feeling in the outback, why films like *Wolf Creek* (2005)[13] hold an unsettling resonance for us. This uneasiness is far more pervasive than the brutality and torture unleashed on the hap-

less (and fictional) English tourists. But perhaps this presents a kind of closure – has the ghost embedded in that film finally found revenge, over a hundred years later, on visitors from the country that stole its land in the first place?

In the Adelaide "haunted" house, the prison that holds Billie, we are left unsure about the line that divides fantasy from reality. Dabrowsky shows us scenes in random order – we know that Billie is waiting for someone or something, but when and for what? The only thing that seems to be anchored in reality is the loudly ticking clock, a constant observer from the kitchen wall. This mechanical and indifferent witness times events that are taking place in the witching hour – the early hours of the morning when ghostly proceedings take precedence. Dabrowsky's camera focuses on interior and exterior mundanity – we see repeated establishment shots of the house, nondescript, ordinary, and resembling any other house in that street. Her camera takes us back there again and again to remind us that this could be happening right under our noses. The restricted and dark interior shots of the house offer the same dingy corridor and uninviting back door, over and over again – as if the house were revolving on its own little axis in its own private universe. The use of lighting is harsh and unforgiving, illuminating the feelings of guilt and memories of betrayal that reside there. The camera shows us bare furnishings – a sparse lounge room with drab colours and a scarf-doused lamp – unloved symbols of a bygone era. Ignored ornaments covered with dust and a bare and dilapidated bathroom with slimy green and yellow tiles symbolise the breakdown of relationships. This place stays barren and bereft of feeling – in other words, there is an absence of love. We see Billie framed tightly within the doorway or resting in a bath that will later act as the delivery room for her own illegitimate child. These settings, simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, have become uncanny.

> An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now thought imaginary. Freud goes on to say that "many people experience the sense of *umheimlich* in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts."[14]

In Billie's universe – her home – she is surrounded by embedded memories of guilt and betrayal. This could serve as a blatant allegory for our feelings of guilt and the betrayal of the first Australians by our pioneer ancestors. Billie is tricked into thinking that she is safe inside, but we know that she needs to acknowledge the ghost and confront the bad behaviour in or-

der to break free and begin the healing process. Until that time, she will be stuck and unable to move forward. From our vantage point, safely outside Billie's universe, the path to resolution seems clear.

If Billie is Cinderella in her story, then her mother and grandmother are the worst incarnation of the ugly sisters. Billie is a servant in this uncanny space, and there is no Prince Charming. She has a chance with Alex, the boy next door, but as soon as he steps into the house things start to unravel. He represents the outside world and a potential lifeline, but, whether in her unconscious or conscious mind, Billie pushes him away at the very moment of her deliverance. This occurs at the same moment that we surmise her mother has died in hospital. With a sense of inevitability she kills her fantasy – the idea that she can escape from her predetermined future. Her unconscious desire has been repressed, and the order of her world, momentarily threatened, has now been returned. She is stuck in the house once more, and this is where she will stay.

From *Family Demons* we learn how our present has been formed by our past. We see alcoholism, aggression, violence, and disrespect of the human condition. We can see the permanent damage of a crime that has been buried and never dealt with or spoken of. We can see how this crime has eroded the core of a family, promoting self-destruction and a sickening malaise of the soul. As a postcolonial nation trying to reconcile with our indigenous people we can recognise aspects of ourselves in this film.

While it is tempting to think of cinema ghosts as simulacra, the manifestations in this film offer a credibility that is disturbingly familiar. The entities that are represented here are real expressions of domestic intragender aggression and violence. These ghosts are fuelled by the cyclic nature of horrendous actions repeated by bloodline – grandmother, mother, and ultimately Billie herself.

So we could say that the behavioural patterns she has learned from her family are the source of Billie's haunting. This female aggression is a phenomenon that has been under-represented in mainstream film but can be found in the horror genre and other forms of experimental and niche cinema such as Ji-Woon Kim's *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003),[15] where the relationship between a stepmother and daughter is explored.

Billie's mother, as the victim of paternal incest and its consequent rage, has been totally repressed. This translates into fury directed at her daughter, whom she holds responsible. *Family Demons* highlights this misdirected blame and rage and is one of a small number of films that look at the devastating impact of abuse and incest on the mother-daughter relationship.[16] In a dream sequence, we learn of Billie's mother's acceptance of her situation and we see her seeking her daughter's forgiveness. In stark

opposition to the rest of the film, the dream sequences are shot in soft focus. Everything is perfectly white and angelic, clothes are clean, sheets are white, and sun streams poetically in through the window. But it is only a dream. Next we learn that Billie, three years later, and under the watchful eye of her mother (now appearing as the ghost), has her own child, and is subjecting it to the same oppressive behaviour she has endured herself.

We can only hope that Billie's daughter, the new generation, can be strong enough to resist the behavioural inheritance that threatens her future. The end of the film doesn't present any such evidence. But in that short glimpse of the child, an innocent handed a loaded deck of cards, we pray that she will somehow be able to start afresh, and perhaps with guidance and education begin to break away from her past and look toward the future in a reconciliatory manner.

Surely the content of a "low art" film like *Family Demons* – low art because of its budget and genre – could be seen as "high art" if it had been made in a different funding system. A bigger budget, stars attached, and the story of domestic violence told in a serious manner without the horror template. However, when compared to a realist film such as *Nil By Mouth* (1997),[17] which also centers on domestic and psychological violence, *Family Demons* uses genre to its advantage. While *Nil By Mouth* plays it straight and, for most, is excruciating to sit through, the power of the horror genre gives *Family Demons* rhetorical force. This film deftly integrates the thrills of the horror genre with a meditation on the determinist nature of domestic violence. What begins as a film that offers to make your skin crawl morphs into a challenging essay on the horror of family abuse and the ongoing suffering of its victims. But, notwithstanding films such as *Psycho* (1960),[18] *Mommie Dearest* (1981),[19] and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962),[20] the "Scary Mutha" films are usually left to sit on the B-grade shelf.

Within a nation that only 18 months ago apologised to Indigenous Australians that were mass murdered and almost eradicated, political uncertainty may have led to a kind of creative paralysis regarding film work around this issue. If our national guilt can be viewed as an encrypted ghost, then a film such as *Family Demons* can claim a wider spectrum of readings than its genre usually invites. An ultra-low-budget film that can portray a ghost that affects us on both a personal and a national level is surely worthy of our attention, and may be a small step towards unlocking our deep-seated collective paralysis.

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NOTES

[1] Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 1.

[2] For example, *Rush* (Channel 2, 1974); *Against the Wind* (Channel 7, 1978); *All the Rivers Run* (Channel 7, 1983) – to name a few.

[3] Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolfman's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[4] Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (Australia: University of Queensland Press, 2002).

[5] Susan Mitchell, *All Things Bright and Beautiful: Murder in the City of Light* (Australia: Macmillan, 2004) 4.

[6] Gibson, *Seven Versions* 15.

[7] Barcroft Boake (under the pseudonym "Surcingle"), *Where the Dead Men Lie* in Where the Dead Men Lie and other Poems by Barcroft Boake, ed A.G. Stephens, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1897) 140.

[8] Gibson, *Seven Versions* 61.

[9] Eerie Horror Fest 2009, Erie, Pennsylvania; Frightnight Fest 2009, Louisville, Kentucky (Best Foreign Film, Best Actress); Shockerfest 2009, Modesto, California; Bram Stoker International Film Festival 2009, Whitby, UK; A Night of Horror International Film Festival, Sydney and Perth, Australia (Best Australian Director); Melbourne Underground Film Festival 2009, Melbourne, Australia.

[10] *Family Demons* official site, date of access: 2 April, 2009 <www.familydemons.com>.

[11] Rolf De Heer (dir), *Bad Boy Bubby* (Australian Film Finance Corporation, Bubby Productions, Fandango, 1993).

[12] Jacques Derrida, "Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok" in *The Wolfman's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*, by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) xxi.

[13] Greg McLean (dir), *Wolf Creek* (Australian Film Finance Corporation, South Australian Fim Corporation, 403 Productions, 2005).

[14] Albert Dickson (ed), *Art and Literature*, vol. 14 (London: Penguin Books, 1985) 335.

[15] Ji-Woon Kim (dir), *A Tale of Two Sisters* (B.O.M. Productions, Masulpiri Productions, 2003).

[16] Taylor Hackford (dir), *Dolores Claiborne* (Castle Rock Entertainment, Columbia Pictures Corporation, 1995) is another example.

[17] Gary Oldman (dir), *Nil By Mouth* (SE8 Group, Europa Corporation, 1997).

[18] Alfred Hitchcock (dir), *Psycho* (Shamley Productions, 1960).

[19] Frank Perry (dir), *Mommie Dearest* (Paramount Pictures, 1981).

[20] Robert Aldrich (dir), *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (Associates & Aldrich Company, Seven Arts Pictures, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1962).