

Dreaming Leichhardt: Wim Wenders at the End of the World

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In Wim Wenders' audacious, cross-planetary, gorgeously preposterous movie, *Until the End of the World* (1991), the *end* is Australia. At its centre, living in an Aboriginal community, is a German ophthalmologist, Henry Farber (played by Max von Sydow), who has invented a visual device to record human dreams. This trope of visionary dreaming, linked explicitly to metaphysical disappearance and extremity, has characterized European imaginings of Australia, above all in speculations occasioned by Ludwig Leichhardt's disappearance in 1848. In the space of absent presence, dream-work flourishes; and Leichhardt's afterlives are many, and monstrously various.

So how is Wim Wenders cinema-seancing Leichhardt? What new materialization (or dematerialization) is this? What projection? And what are the displacements and distortions that re-figure the explorer hidden in an indigenous centre, bent on scientific magic and the penetration of mystery?

The political imaginary of this film is the one that also operates in the fetishizing of Leichhardt: it meditates in a symbolic way on the lost German hero in Australia and opposes the idea of corrupt European fantasy and an antipodean 'dream' which is a special, possibly redemptive, form of cognition. *Until the End of the World* is deterritorialized German cinema; it dislodges the idea of an essential identity, and plays with the nomadic and the exilic in relation to the hero: the Heimatfilm and the Heimat are implicitly critiqued.

A joint German-Australian production (Wenders directed but it is scripted with Peter Carey), the film is unusually long, and the title collapses spatial and temporal categories in the hybrid genres of road-movie, romance and science-fiction. David, an Aboriginal detective, follows Eugene, an Australian novelist, who follows Clare, the beautiful French heroine, who follows Sam, the German-American protagonist, around the planet; a kind of human tracking to reach his father, the scientist, Henry Farber. Sam has stolen the secret prototype of a viewing device which captures images that can be directly screened onto the retina: his mission is to use this device to photograph images so that he can restore his blind mother's sight. His recordings are presented in a non-realist mode with brilliant, fractured colours and under-resolved, gaudy and almost pixelated images. In a symbolic globalization, the movie was filmed in fifteen cities and seven countries and 'the end' is arrived at just before the eve of year 2000.

Might this be considered a Leichhardtian film? Farber, the ideological destination of the movie, appears as a kind of mad scientist: he is obsessive, disheveled, both authoritarian and possibly Jewish (since we are told his family was wiped out by the Nazis); but he has come to Australia to help Aboriginal people heal their eyesight. A visionary in the practical sense, he establishes a laboratory in a cave (a Platonic parable here) and is also working on the transmission of images directly to the retinas of blind subjects. For sighted people his invention allows them to record and play back their own dreams, which leads to addiction and madness. So there is an analogy forged between film-making and dreaming, and a deep pessimism about the pre-emptive status of recorded images and how they are used, what Wenders once called “the disease of images.” A comparison is made between two forms of dreaming: European dreaming is neurotic, solipsistic and individual; Aboriginal dreaming is mythic, meaningful and communitarian. The German scientist must undo his Western presuppositions, or die. Farber’s tyrannical ambition is understood by the Aborigines as culturally transgressive: they abandon him when they realize he is seeking to capture ‘dream-time’.

One of the most remarkable observations from Leichhardt’s journal concerns sight. Curious about the apparently superior vision of Aboriginal people, he concludes it is a matter of different physiology: “Impressions on the retina [for Aborigines] seem to be naturally more intense than on that of a European, and their recollections are remarkably exact, even to the most minute details [...] things [...] seem to form a kind of Daguerreotype impression on their minds.”

This is not to suggest Wim Wenders knows Leichhardt’s journal or was seeking cinematically to thematize or illustrate it; rather that in his somewhat anxious allegory of desire and place there is coincidentally a preoccupation with a kind of European *lack* and the registration of the real by uncanny images. Farber misunderstands Aboriginal dreaming – it’s not an individual psychology, but a joint storytelling – and the film resolves with words; the novelist holds the sanest route to self-knowledge and understanding.

The narrative afterlives of Leichhardt include many in the mode of science fiction. Novels from the 1890s rehearse the explorer’s fate as a hyperbolic, often fantastic, fable of hidden existence. There are also various versions of the dream: Henry Kendall’s elegy (1880) depicts Leichhardt at his death, “dreaming” of Germany, so that he is spirited away beyond “the [...] furnace [in which his] sacred shell was laid.” The interior of Australia is a space of morbidity and annihilation and the idea that a man of culture ends up in a zone of nothingness has a radical existential appeal. The outback here has no meaning, no beauty and no positive

valency: it is infernal, bleak and in opposition to a European pastoral ideal. Wenders knows otherwise; it is not the body of the white man that sacralizes the land, and screening dreams carries a connotation of metaphysical violation.

Sam's recorded images are the last vestiges of a destroyed Europe that no longer exists, and existential despair leads him and Clare to become obsessed with replaying their own dreams. Allegorically, Europe is caught up in pathological and deadly self-regard; Australia is the repository of *another kind of dreaming* that retains its power because it is not made visible. Traditionally remnant presence – the trace, the relic – works in a register that heroicises and rewards the explorer so that failure and death convert to rhetorical compensation and imaginative excess; in Wenders' version mourning and elegy are the keynotes. He wisely concludes there are knowledges inaccessible to cinematic representation and his film insists that some mysterious disappearances can never be recorded.

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