

## John Gillies: Divide

Fiona Trigg

Now the Lord had said unto Abram,  
'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house,  
unto a land that I will show thee:  
And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee,  
and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing;  
And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee'.

These words from the book of Genesis are heard over the opening shots of John Gillies' *Divide*. As the Biblical imperative to go forth and colonise hangs in the air, we try to place the voice of the unseen narrator, wondering if she is a child or an adult, or perhaps she is Indigenous. Does the earthy, thoughtful quality of her voice indicate reverence towards the text, or scepticism? As she speaks, we watch a man disturb an anthill with a stick; this gesture could be one of curiosity or violence. The man falls in behind his companions who set off through the bush, complete with rolled blankets, a horse and a small flock of sheep. The men do not speak, they do not announce their intentions or their place in history —they don't quite seem to be contemporary and they're certainly not from Biblical times, but neither are they early settlers. Indeed, these carefully constructed ambiguities in the relationship between the text, the narrator and the action are intensely unsettling. The voice-over continues as the men cross the frame:

So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him,  
and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan;  
and into the land of Canaan they came.

Responding to an interviewer's question about the concept of a 'colonialist belief in predestination' John Gillies observed:

'It's there, it's buried and it keeps coming back. And we've seen that so strongly in the last five years here. I tear my hair out. And it's particularly the Bible, especially the Old Testament, which is obsessed with who's worthy, who's unworthy, who's saved and who's not, who belongs to the land and who doesn't. All these dualities are set out in that text and it's obviously the basis for Islam and Judaism — who God will bless and not bless. So it's not like he'll bless everyone. It's the chosen. And it's interesting to think about Australia in that paradigm and the forming of nations and the idea of the chosen nation.' (quoted in K. Gallasch, 'Across Great Divides', *RealTime*, no. 60, 2004).

Of course Gillies isn't alone in tearing at his hair, *Divide* emerges in the wake of a recent spate of Australian feature films that gnaw away at questions of identity and nationhood. Like *Divide*,

these films are largely set in the country, bringing their concerns out into the open. Their characters walk the territory, in plots driven by journeys and quests in films such as *One Night The Moon*, 2001, the musical which strikingly couples competing concepts of land ownership in the one song; the settler who strides across his fields singing ‘this land is mine’ while the tracker counters with ‘this land is me’. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 2002, casts stolen children as heroes making an epic return from exile while *The Tracker*, 2002, plays out a straight-forward road-trip of retribution following the massacre of Aboriginal people by a white policeman. Following a more diffuse logic, *Japanese Story*, 2003, has a white woman made vulnerable and open to change by the experience of being lost in the desert, which the film figures as a kind of multicultural catharsis. Or consider the two indigenous teenagers in *Beneath Clouds*, 2002, who tramp the back roads of New South Wales together, trying to find a pathway from their troubled pasts towards some kind of future. Sheltering in a disused church, they tear a Bible to start a fire, a sequence that resonates with *Divide*'s lyrical images of Bible pages being torn out and scattered through the bush.

*Divide* makes a fascinating addition to this loose genre of ‘walking’ films. At under half an hour in length, shot in black and white, with barely any dialogue, it operates differently from a feature. However, with its conventional shot structure, its naturalistic rhythms, its sheep, taciturn men and gum trees, *Divide* seems to emerge from somewhere deep within the collective memory of Australian cinema. Gillies has a long history of working with moving image in a gallery-based performance or installation context, and this work intriguingly draws from both worlds. As the artist observes in a synopsis, ‘A-logical elements and situations are placed in a cinematic structure that is temporally and spatially continuous’.

We have a lot at stake in our historical narratives making sense, and *Divide* produces its truly uncanny effect by making the Old Testament text, and other apparent incongruities — such as the Chinese opera singer who the men witness performing by lantern-light beneath a tree — appear to have a natural place within the familiar bush setting. The performers create further levels of intrigue; at times their actions and demeanor sit comfortably with the text, at others they seem vulnerable, unable to name or interact with their surroundings. One man is killed by a falling branch, another is thrown by his horse, and the sheep need to be counted again and again. Well might the narrator proclaim ‘for he who thou blesseth is blessed, and he who thou curseth is cursed’, but for the men on this strange pilgrimage, and for the audience watching, it becomes increasingly difficult to find the point of division between these two states. *Divide* questions the origin of the stories we tell ourselves about nationhood. It suggests we examine the degree to which we feel relaxed and comfortable with the sense of entitlement that once informed a colonizing intent, that haunts a post-colonialist sensibility, and that structures contemporary thinking still.

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