



High Ground directed by
Stephen Maxwell Johnson

Teaching notes prepared
by Margaret Saltau



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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Introduction

High Ground, Australia, 2020 (1 hour 44 minutes)
Directed by Stephen Maxwell Johnson

Cast

Simon Baker – **Travis**
Jacob Junior Nayinggul – **Gutjuk**
Jack Thompson – **Moran**
Callan Mulvey – **Eddy**
Caren Pistorius – **Claire**
Ryan Corr – **Braddock**
Sean Mununggurr – **Baywara**
Witiyana Marika – **Grandfather Dharrpa**
Esmerelda Marimowa – **Gulwirri**
Maximillian Johnson – **Bruce**
Aaron Pedersen – **Walter**

We need only to read the credits at the end of *High Ground* to become aware of the enormous amount of collective collaboration and cooperation which was responsible for the creation of this film. The list of First Nations clans and communities who combined in its production, ‘our great team’, is extensive. In the cinema, where students’ first viewing should ideally take place, often audiences leave during the credits, assuming the film is over. For this film, students are encouraged to read them all, as they give an understanding of the scope of the film’s achievement, a demonstration of the importance of connecting with each other and Country (1:31:40 – 1:39:54).

This is the director Stephen Maxwell Johnson’s second feature film only; he spent most of his childhood in the Northern Territory, and has close ties with its inhabitants. His ability to involve so many First Nations people in the making of *High Ground* is in itself a clue to his authorial concerns. His subject matter has been distilled from many different clans, and he is familiar with the long history of colonial oppression, however benign the intentions of some of the white settlers might have been. Galarrwuy Yunupingu wrote (2008): ‘These are the 13 clans of the Gove Peninsula, in east Arnhem Land. Each is independent and proud; each is bound to the others through the moieties of Yirritja and Dua. ... The clans of east Arnhem Land join me in acknowledging no king, no queen, no church and no state. Our allegiance is to each other, to our land and to the ceremonies that define us.’

The contributions of First Nations people to this film mean that they speak for themselves, and Stephen Maxwell Johnson is careful not to speak for them. The film is fiction, and the plot is riveting and ‘entertaining’, yet it vividly encapsulates and confronts key problems and shameful events in Australia’s history. By fictionalising, dramatising and personalising some of the many historical examples of colonial control, appropriation, oppression and slaughter, it exemplifies what happened, the commonality of which is exploitation, deracination and suffering. The metaphor of a fishing net holding a variety of fish is apt for the way the film functions to encompass a myriad of Black experiences at the hands of the colonisers.

High Ground is set in Australia's Northern Territory; it opens in 1919, just after the end of World War I, and finishes twelve years later. It has variously been categorised as a period film, as an Australian western, as a revisionist western; however, although based on shameful all-too-common slaughters of Indigenous populations by colonial settlers, this film is drama, not history, using fiction to discover and examine the truth of the past, looking through an early twenty-first century lens. It assumes a familiarity with genre movies such as 'The Western' amongst its audience; on one level, it is an engaging story – on another, it is an analysis of colonialism and its effects on a land and its people.

To understand the significance of many aspects of this film text, students will need to revisit some facts of white Australian history. In 1770 Captain Cook claimed eastern Australia in the name of the King of England as *terra nullius* – 'land belonging to no one'. This meant that under British law all the land of Australia became Crown land. Aboriginal property rights were ignored. All the land belonged to the Crown or whomever the Crown granted or sold it to. Today, this seems breathtaking in its arrogant greed, but *High Ground* shows most of the white characters assuming the validity of *terra nullius*, and unquestioningly acting on its premises. Stephen Maxwell Johnson exposes the ludicrous and appalling nature of this concept through the meeting scene (from 58:03 onwards).

The 'Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia 1788 – 1930' (The Centre for 21st Century Humanities, 2022) records the first massacre of seven 'Aboriginal People' by 'Colonisers' as having taken place on 1 September 1794. No coloniser died. Other similar and horrific events took place in the interim between this first instance and the tragedy of 1911, when thirty Yolngu men, women and children were killed in the Gan Gan massacre in the Northern Territory. Galarrwuy Yunupingu said, 'At Gan Gan these men on horseback performed their duties and killed an entire clan group – men, women and children. They shot them out and killed them in any way they could so that they could take the land. These men on horseback then rode to Birany Birany and killed many of our Yarrwidi Gumatj, the saltwater people who cared for the great ceremonies at Birany Birany. There are few places in our lives as sacred as Gan Gan – from its fresh waters all things come – and Birany Birany.' (The Centre for 21st Century Humanities, 2022).

The genesis of *High Ground* lies in the Gan Gan massacre, and Galarrwuy Yunupingu's description could also be applied to the massacre of Gutjuk's family in the film. When we ask students to identify pivotal moments in the film, the slaughter of men, women and children going about their daily lives in their camp by the water (06:20) is an obvious point.

In terms of plot, this first massacre functions as the prologue for the rest of the film. Its presence is constantly with us: the landscape itself reminds us, neither Aboriginal nor white characters can free themselves from memories of it, and its violence cannot be eradicated. In the six minutes that the film takes to arrive at the scene of the massacre, it has already laid out the values associated with the First Nations people, and those of the settlers.

Ways into the text

Students might find their ways into *High Ground* through talking and listening, as well as by viewing and thinking! Some of these activities could be divided amongst the class, and presented in written and oral form.

- Consider starting each class with an Acknowledgement of Country. Encourage students to question and research what this means, and to discuss and compare the different attitudes to the land of Australia's original inhabitants and of the white settlers.
- Some basic ideas could arise from a discussion of how many students know any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and how much students know about them.
- Develop a word bank, an activity that will continue through this text study. Can non-Indigenous people use terms such as mob, blackfella, myall?
- Research frontier theory, as postulated by American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, who argued that the frontier, the wilderness, offered freedom from Old World limitations and laws, and had land free for the taking. Does *High Ground* paint Australia's north in the same way, as offering an individualism that extended to rough justice?
- Some learning activities, depending on the amount of knowledge (or lack of it) or prejudice that might be discovered, could be for each student to develop an oral presentation focusing on an aspect of Indigenous culture and of Australian history, relevant to the film, including the frontier wars.
- Familiarise students with the geography and geology of the Northern Territory with a particular emphasis on Arnhem Land and the Kakadu region. Students with an interest in art may wish to present a report on some of the rock art sites in these regions, their history and significance (then and now).
- A stepping-off point for these activities could be a discussion of the class members' own cultural heritage and its importance, and language.
- How are First Nations people portrayed in the Australian media? Has this changed over time? Students could consider, for example, recent media coverage of the challenges experienced by Indigenous sports people. The AFL provides many examples, as does netball. A discussion point could be raised by viewing a clip of Lang Hancock advocating for sterilisation of Aboriginal people, then discussing the offer, then withdrawal, of sponsorship of Netball Australia by Gina Hancock,

when a First Nations player refused to wear the company logo. Students could talk about who really has a right to own the wealth appropriated by the Hancock family, and whether accepting huge sums of money from mining companies is pragmatic or morally compromising.

- After a first viewing of *High Ground*, a general discussion of how the Aboriginal characters are depicted.
- Stephen Maxwell Johnson's first feature film was *Yolgnu Boy*, which some students might be familiar with, but he is also the director of the music video for the song 'Treaty', written by Paul Kelly, Mandawuy Yunupingu, Stuart Kellaway, Cal Williams, Gurrumul Yunupingu, Milkayngu Mununggurr, and Banula Marika. Watch the two original versions of 'Treaty'. Each is directed by Stephen Maxwell Johnson, who claims he did not intend to make a political statement.
- One of the early credits at the film's end, reads: 'With deepest respect to the memory of

DR DJARRIJNNTJUN YUNUPINGU
lead singer of Yothu Yindi, Australian of the Year
both-ways educator, proud Yolgnu man'

Research Dr Yunupingu, his life, his music and his philosophy. Can you see his influence in *High Ground*? He said, "Mandawuy" means "from clay"; Djarrtjuntjun means "roots of the paperbark tree that still burn and throw off heat after a fire has died down"; Yunupingu depicts a solid rock that, having travelled from freshwater, stands in salty waters, its base deep in the earth. I am Gudjuk the fire kite.' ('Mandawuy Yunupingu', 2022).

Genre

The American western had its birth almost simultaneously with the American film industry. Predicated on the assumptions of the American Dream, the genre examined the mythic 'civilising' movement from the east to the west, as the frontier extended, taming the wilderness. In the 1970s, the revisionist western was born; the frontier no longer existed in these films, and right and wrong were no longer clearcut. From the typical 'white hat' of the 'cowboy hero' who faced off the black-hatted villain, in these later westerns, often labelled Spaghetti Westerns, or Dirty Westerns, moral issues were murkier, moral purity almost impossible. Legendary director John Ford shot most of his westerns in Monument Valley, which became as powerful a presence in his films as is the Arnhem Land landscape in *High Ground*. The vast empty vistas dwarfed humanity; the imposition of 'civilisation' on the 'wilderness' raised questions as

to the values of both, just as *terra nullius* today seems an appalling assumption. Westerns were often vehicles for depictions of situations that could not be dealt with overtly, such as in the McCarthy era film, *High Noon*.

The westerns of Sam Peckinpah, particularly *The Wild Bunch* (1969), have probably been an influence on Stephen Maxwell Johnson's choices in *High Ground*. Peckinpah's characters are ageing; the west has changed; the 'hero' is not law-abiding, yet retains a type of moral code that is important to him. In *High Ground*, we can see many examples of the director's appropriation of the characteristics and tropes of a Peckinpah 'dirty' western. For instance, the mob of 'blackfellas' that attacks the stations of white settlers is called the 'wild mob', combining the Indigenous word for their collective with a word connoting the uncivilised wilderness that the whites fear and are attempting to control.

Is it possible to 'label' *High Ground*, and fit it into a genre? The Australian frontier as seen in the film is in the north – Stephen Maxwell Johnson has commented that he would prefer the label 'northern'. Other terms such as 'meat-pie', 'kangaroo' and 'outback' western have been used for other films that also engage with ideas similar to *High Ground*, such as *The Proposition*, *Mystery Road*, *Mad Dog Morgan*, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and many more. In terms of intertextuality, students might enjoy watching some of these, as well as the American films, *Shane* and *The Wild Bunch*.

In a film that is so intrinsically concerned with uncomfortable questions associated with Australian history and identity, it could even be argued that to appropriate the name of an American genre to describe this film is to perpetuate a colonial mindset.

Yet, Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney wrote of finding a language appropriate to explore his subject, of discovering 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament', thus writing about an Iron Age culture to examine the violence in twentieth-century Northern Ireland.

In the case of *High Ground*, in referencing the iconography of the western genre, in particular that of the revisionist western, as well as specifically Christian imagery of an Edenic innocent garden, Stephen Maxwell Johnson has employed a cinematic language familiar to his audiences. Importantly, he juxtaposes this language with Indigenous language and culture to communicate to tell the stories of the earth's oldest civilisation.

Often, texts that are set in historical times manifestly portray the times in which they were created. *High Ground* is a film that reflects the context of the era of its making. The strong authorial point of view is informed by the values dominant in the early twenty-first century, in an era when we are finally approaching the advent of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. As a society, it is likely that we now condemn the racism and colonial oppression of the early twentieth century, and its roots in white settlement. Producer Maggie Miles, in the 'Extras' that accompany the film on DVD, says: 'I love that Australians are ready now to face these stories in a way that they haven't been in the past.' (Extras, Resistance, 1:20).

... we probably need a better word than 'western' for films that situate the tensions and tropes of Hollywood operas in their own distinct geographical context (Lodge, 2020).

Westerns are inherently political movies because they are about imposing a template of order upon apparent chaos. The establishment of a state, in these tales, is not an abstract or academic concern; it requires direct physical action in order to claim territory, enact laws, and create and sustain an economy. The so-called revisionist western, popular in the 1970s and of which *High Ground* is a latter-day example, is about the same thing, only viewed from the other end of the rifle. In subverting racial and sexual archetypes, they reveal the price paid by those previously consigned to the margins of the story, or excluded altogether from its telling (Danielsen, 2021).

Suggested classroom activity

- In groups, create a table with the characteristics of American westerns (including revisionist ones) in one column, similarities that they find with *High Ground* in a second column, and comments and examples of differences/ways the genre has been subverted in a third column.

Structure of the text

A short outline of the film's plot

High Ground opens with a drone shot over the sacred Nimbuwa Rock; the titles tell us that the setting is 'Arnhem Land Northern Australia 1919'. It is a year since the end of The Great War (World War I) and those men who have returned are trying to adjust to civilian life. Many, like ex-soldiers Travis and Eddy, join the police.

Director Stephen Maxwell Johnson sets the film in Australia's last frontier – the Northern Territory, the wilderness of Arnhem Land. From the beginning, we see the tension between the First Nations population and the intruding colonialists. During the first twenty minutes, we also see how tenuous the rule of English law is, as the police massacre an entire community, in an incompetent but horrifically violent attempt to punish other, different, Aboriginal men for killing a cow. There is little of 'law' or 'justice' here.

Only two survive the attack: a warrior, Baywara, and his nephew, Gutjuk. Travis, who attempts to live according to a code of honour lacking in most other white men, saves the boy, taking him to the East Alligator River Mission Outpost, handing him over to Claire, the sister of the minister, John Braddock. The badly wounded Baywara is found by Grandfather Dharrpa, who promises, 'I will heal you.' (20:35). Travis abandons his job in disgust.

Twelve years later, the seeds sown by the massacre are bearing fruit. We now see Travis killing a crocodile; Moran and Eddy arrive. Led by Baywara, a 'wild mob' (22:58) has been burning and wreaking terror on white settlements: '... they crossed a line. They killed a white woman.' (23:33). Moran insists that Travis must hunt the mob down, calling it 'your mess.'

Travis takes Gutjuk, now eighteen years old and called 'Tommy' in the mission, with him in an attempt to take his uncle Baywara peacefully, averting more violence, an attempt that the film argues is doomed by the events of the past. Moran sends Eddy and Walter after them. Once Baywara and his group are found, after discussion, Grandfather Dharrpa agrees to talk to Moran, saying '... we need to make peace.' (58:50).

The ceremonial meeting between the Aboriginal and the non-Indigenous communities takes place at the mission; Gutjuk translates for his grandfather; Moran's nephew Bruce is also present. The formal elevated language used by Moran degenerates into swearing and threats and the meeting abruptly finishes, when the sound of horses galloping heralds

the news that 'the mob just hit Kurtz's station. Two dead.' (1:07:44). Travis is given 'a headstart' to hunt Baywara, telling Claire, 'They can't pin it on me if I'm locked up, can they?' (1:09:50).

In what can be seen as an echoing of the massacre scene, at the same water hole, Travis shoots Baywara, thinking that he is about to kill Gutjuk. Travis also shoots Walter, and Gutjuk, now realising who was responsible for the murder of his family, shoots Travis.

The wounded Travis is put in irons, and back at the mission is nursed by Claire, while Grandfather Dharrpa and Gutjuk talk in a cave in the escarpment. Gutjuk also talks to Gulwirri, the 'wild' young woman who is with Baywara's people. After Gutjuk deliberately creates a disturbance by leaving bullets on a fire, he attacks the mission settlement; there is a stand-off; then Travis shoots Moran, Claire shoots Eddy, and Bruce aims at her, but Travis takes the bullet for Claire. He dies. Gutjuk and Gulwirri ride off on the piebald horse.

Suggested classroom activity

- Students could start by dividing the film into two sections according to time: the action leading up to and including the massacre and its immediate aftermath for both the Aboriginal and settler communities, and the main body of the film, set twelve years later.

At the end of *High Ground*, as the credits begin, audiences are left with an image of the same landscape that opened the film – a drone shot of Nimbuwa Rock, in Arnhem Land. Mystical, mythic, unchanged, unknowable, it dominates the land; impassive – merely existing. As the sun sinks behind the Rock, its silhouette first stands out in greater relief, then disappears into the black screen, as the singing in language continues. The director has used drones throughout this film to 'create an immersive piece of cinema that really puts you in that world ... [which has] never been on screen before' (Johnson, Extras, Setting). As both literal setting and metaphor, the landscape both drives the plot and enacts the central conflict.

The similarity of the film's opening and closing shots generates a sense of neat completion which does not really reflect the effect of what has taken place throughout the film. The director has not only conveyed a sense of the landscape as a palpable presence, as well as a source of meaning and conflict, but has also used it as a transitional tool to cut from shot/sequence to shot/sequence. Finally, the drone shots from the 'high ground' signal these cuts. Often the camera does not move, inviting viewers to contemplate what they are seeing, to re-centre the action in the context of the vast eternal austere beauty of the land.

There are several crucial points in *High Ground* that punctuate the flow of the film, directing the audience's attention to Johnson's concerns. Students should consider the function of the following, and argue for the inclusion of other pivotal scenes and sequences.

- the massacre scene
- the meeting between Grandfather Dharrpa and Moran
- the two 'photography' scenes
- the shots from the 'high ground'
- the tension between the high ground and the lowlands
- domestic scenes – the Aboriginal camp and the mission
- the final sequence, slaughter and departure.

The film's structure is complicated by occasional flashbacks, and many references to the role of the massacre and its effects a dozen years later. If the massacre illustrates the difficulty of any peaceful coexistence and understanding between 'the oldest civilisation' on earth, and the European settlers, by 1931 the situation has festered and been exacerbated. The Indigenous community seems now to be divided into the angry characters who see fighting as their only hope, and the passive, daunted 'mission' ones who seem defeated and deracinated. The dignified figure of Grandfather Dharrpa straddles these groups, insisting on protecting his family, his people. He stands for makarrata – for peace after a dispute.

The characters' movements are depicted as a series of splintering off and of brief confrontations and encounters, with the overarching journey of Gutjuk to a discovery of his self, and of his identity, to his final decision. His search for Baywara is ultimately a search for himself. When Gutjuk and Gulwirri ride off in the final scene, we could argue that Gutjuk has made his decision. It is telling that the final reckoning takes place at the mission, and we are left with the image of the four dead white bodies as Gutjuk symbolically rejects the white 'civilisation', including its religion, as well as the anger that typifies Baywara.

If Gutjuk's travels are presented as a voyage to discovery, he is accompanied on much of it by Travis, who could be argued to have replaced Baywara as a teacher and mentor, at least to a degree. But in spite of riding a white horse for part of the film, Travis is flawed and finally revealed as ineffectual, both morally and as a guide. Johnson suggests that there can be no solution, that opportunities are lost forever.

Connecting devices

- The land: almost all transitions are achieved through drone shots of the landscape in which we discover the characters, often initially invisible, and only becoming apparent as the camera zooms in. The effect of this dwarfing of human beings is to emphasise the presence, beauty and power of the landscape. These images are taken from high ground.
- Birds, in particular Gutjuk's totem the hawk which accompanies him on his journey. In general, bird calls dominate the soundtrack.
- Songs in language; the music of the didgeridoo.
- The contrast between shots of bare black feet running, and of horses' hooves galloping, crushing vegetations as the riders hunt down the land's First Nations inhabitants.
- Repetition and mirroring of journeys – the vastness of Arnhem Land is impressive, unchanging, mythical in its presence; within this terrain, man hunts and is hunted, searches and doubles back. It could be argued that the only characters to actually find what they are looking for, although they did not know it, are Gutjuk and Gulwirri.
- Why do characters keep returning to the site of the mission? Is the opposing setting that of the water hole?

Not only is the massacre the trigger for the violence and conflict twelve years later, but as an audience, we are encouraged to be sympathetic to the Aboriginal characters. The long shots, the drone shots, the consistent shots from the literal high ground, are all persuasive means for viewers to consider the ideas and issues, which are often skewed against a white settler perspective.

Characters

In a film in which most characters say very little, with only a handful of extended speeches, their visual representation often speaks volumes. Individuals are consistently portrayed in the context of their surroundings, and in relation to other characters. It is possible to argue that the characters function according to the qualities and values they embody.

The majority of the actors, that is, almost all the First Nations actors, are not professional. This speaks volumes for the spirit of cooperation that brought forth this film. The Aboriginal actors add authenticity and poignancy to their roles.

In comparison, students should consider that some of the non-Indigenous actors are very well known, and bring their personae, and status, with them to the screen.

Broadly, the characters can be divided into racial groups, and further within those groups, into subgroups. In this way, the Aboriginal policeman and tracker Walter (Aaron Pedersen) straddles the space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures – having no real allegiance to either group, despised by both.

Suggested classroom activities

The following group activities should begin after students' first viewing of *High Ground* and develop as they study the film in further depth. Students can suggest further categories and comparisons as they develop their knowledge and understanding.

- Mind maps of the characters in relation to each other.
- Mind maps of the characters in relation to their settings, both natural and man-made.
- Using technological tools, or even A3 paper, drill down from the general to the particular.
- Do the characters 'come alive' or are they merely symbols?
- Some pairs to consider:
 - the 'nephews' – Gutjuk and Bruce
 - the uncles – Baywara and Moran
 - Moran and Grandfather Dharrpa
 - Travis and Eddy Ambrose
 - Travis and Baywara
 - Gulwirri and Claire
 - Gutjuk and Baywara
 - Gutjuk and Travis

Students could also consider the following perspective, collecting evidence from the film to agree with or refute this point of view: '... everyone here's a little too – pun only partially intended – black and white. Each character is assigned one defining characteristic: Claire is Selfless, Eddy is Evil. Braddock, the priest, is Weak. The whitefellas are mostly bad, and the blackfellas generally noble.' (Danielsen, 2021).

Gutjuk (Jacob Junior Nayinggul)

There is a case for the argument that Gutjuk is the protagonist of *High Ground*. The film follows his progress from childhood as he begins to attempt to become a man far too early. By the end of *High Ground*, he has been taught many lessons, by Baywara, by Travis, by the brutal forces of the colonial power, by Gulwirri and above all, by Grandfather Dharrpa. The sweet-faced child daubed with white ochre has grown through various stages. Johnson's subversion of the western genre shifts our focus from the potentially heroic white man to a matured black man, achieving balance by the final scenes.

Moran (Jack Thompson)

Brett Moran, played by iconic Australian actor Jack Thompson, is the lead police officer, representing the laws and values of the King of England in this distant part of a distant country; he also exhibits the worst of the qualities of the colonisers. Seemingly imperturbable, often inscrutable, he pays lip service to admirable traits such as justice, duty and loyalty, but in reality, he is devious, unscrupulous, hypocritical, racist and actually without illusions or principles. The 'chain of command', quite separate from considerations of right and wrong, justice and truth, responsibility and honesty, dictates his decisions. While Grandfather Dharrpa teaches, explains and guides, Moran issues orders.

Mostly, Moran sends his men out into the bush, and he stays in the one place, the mission, as his headquarters, a stronghold of white presence. Like a chess- or puppet-master, he manipulates men as if they are not human beings. He plays the 'long game' – he is the only character with connections to the 'south', to politicians, the one who claims he can see the historical importance of what is happening, and who needs to control public perceptions. In a nod to the famous line in John Ford's film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.', Moran attempts to create a convenient false picture of 'fact'. Students could analyse the two scenes where official photographs are being taken: consider why Moran has asked for these moments to be recorded for history, and discuss the 'facts' and the 'truth' that each photograph depicts.

Moran openly bribes Braddock when it suits him, he refers to the slaughter at the water hole as a ‘mess’ to be cleared up, disregarding all moral considerations, he blackmails Travis, the only white man who attempts to act according to his conscience: ‘The truth’s a funny thing ... questions come with it. Like, how did two whitefellas end up with your bullets in them?’ (24:28).

Moran’s warning, ‘I don’t need to tell you what happens if this “Baywara” gets a voice’, resonates with a twenty-first century Australian audience, who hears, daily, about the importance of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament and the Uluru Statement from the Heart. Even in his formal meeting with Grandfather Dharrpa, Moran does not really listen or respond to the other man; he is in the process of saying nothing – ‘it is not my decision’ – when they are interrupted.

When provoked or surprised into shedding his public persona, Moran’s speech changes, ‘your son’ becoming ‘black bastards’. His habit of calling younger men ‘son’ reminds us of the patriarchal system, the English monarchy, that he represents.

Travis (Simon Baker) and Eddy (Callan Mulvey)

The film invites us to admire Travis, but he is ultimately compromised by the patriarchal, colonialist system of which he is part, and from which he cannot free himself. Although he does not shoot any ‘blackfellas’ in the massacre, he and others see him as morally culpable. When he tells Eddy that who fired first ‘matters’ (16:23 – 16:30) and that he is ‘not lying’, he seems superior to his colleague who is seen as a foil to him throughout the film. Travis can only walk away from being a police officer, desert – he cannot stay and, as Eddy says, ‘act as a unit’. However, his desertion, in the end, achieves nothing (16:23 – 16:30).

For the first part of the film, Travis seems to be a typical ‘western’ hero – independent, clinging to a personal code at odds with his society, expert with a gun, a man with a past. The relationship with Eddy unravels as Travis becomes more of an outlier. They were mates during the war; more importantly, they had trusted and relied on each other, put their lives in each other’s hands. Eddy was once Travis’s spotter. Director Stephen Maxwell Johnson gives Eddy one of the few extended speeches in the film. He is conventional in terms of the time in which the film is set; thus, he is racist, casually violent and does not question orders. He says simplistically, ‘Can’t share a country ...’ (1:22:39).

Eddy is clearly damaged; he says that as a spotter, ‘... you don’t just find the target. You confirm the kill. You watch as the head explodes. You see the mist of

blood, the dead eyes ... Travis is the nice one.’ (from 58:00 onwards). How does the way Eddy speaks of what they did attempt to distance himself from his acts? The effect of ‘the kill’ and ‘the head’?

When Eddy tells Walter, ‘One way [to look at a situation] is your way, the blackfella way, which in my opinion is reckless and lacking in precision’ (46:36), the irony is that as he speaks of ‘blackfella mumbo jumbo’ he is in the rifle’s telescopic sights; his ‘precision’ has let him down.

The film suggests an attraction between Travis and Claire, and also that Eddy is attracted to Claire, who is unresponsive to him. The ‘mateship’ fostered by the war is shattered by Travis’s desertion after the massacre. Eddy asks him, ‘Why are you dropping me for this kid?’ (30:35) and later complains, ‘Look at you! You care more about this black piece of shit than you do about yourself!’ Unlike Travis, Eddy is not portrayed as introspective; he does not develop or grow in awareness. He transitions easily from the all-male camaraderie of war to the similar zeitgeist of the Northern Territory police. The element of homosexuality that has often been associated with the concept of Australian mateship can be discerned in Eddy’s jealousy and puzzlement.

By portraying Travis as a flawed character and denying him heroic stature, Stephen Maxwell Johnson subverts the western genre, proposing that a hero can be black. The repeated reversals of journeys, tracing the trails of others, then returning, the hunter becoming the hunted, all emphasise Travis’s loss of effectiveness. His rifle is insufficient, and indeed a motif of self-perpetuating violence. We can argue that his final gesture, saving Claire’s life and losing his own, is in keeping with his moral stance, but viewers also need to ask what he has truly achieved.

Walter (Aaron Pederson)

Walter, played by Aaron Pederson, one of the only professional First Nations actors in *High Ground*, occupies the ground between Indigenous and non-Indigenous, but is dismissed as a solution; both sides are contemptuous of him. Moran uses Walter to control and humiliate Eddy, as he sets them after Travis and Gutjuk. Eddy’s racist, ‘I don’t need that half-caste bastard’ (37:52) is reinforced by the old man watching – ‘... bad fella that one.’ He tells Eddy, ‘I’m worried [about facing Travis] because I’m not stupid.’ Belonging to neither group, coming from Queensland, Walter is marked, scarred over his heart, by Travis, who is the one who finally kills him in another reversal of movement, and beside the water hole.

Claire (Caren Pistorius)

Claire Braddock is constrained by early twentieth-century gender expectations that deny her any real autonomy. She is there to serve and aid her brother, though she seems superior to him in judgement, morality and courage. When Travis brings the orphaned Gutjuk to the mission, he delivers him straight into Claire's arms, in spite of an Aboriginal woman wanting him. Her role reflects the limited choices associated with female characters in the western genre; she is a 'Good Woman', not expected to have her own opinions or desires. She is gentle with, and respectful to, the Aboriginal people around her; she feeds and treats them, but they appear diminished in this domesticated milieu. She has learned their language, unlike the police. Her 'domestication' of Gutjuk as 'Tommy' is important in deciding where we might put Claire on a moral scale.

The ultimately ineffectual Claire is portrayed as tied to her complicit brother, who does more harm than good, suggesting a critique of religion and the missionary impulse. Some students will lack some sympathy for Claire, who, apart from two occasions, seems rather passive. The scenes when Claire hits Travis, and the one at the end where she shoots Eddy, need to be carefully analysed.

Suggested classroom activities

- Is Claire as admirable as possible, given her circumstances?
- In what settings do we see Claire?
- What is she doing?
- Does she move around at all, e.g. beyond the mission compound?
- What choices is she given?
- Would we react to her character differently one hundred years ago?
- Is Claire like Travis in that she does harm whilst attempting to do good?
- How do we react to her killing of Eddy?
- What will become of her?

Gulwirri (Esmerelda Marimowa)

In the outspoken Gulwirri, it is possible, at this #MeToo point in our history, to see someone who embodies twenty-first century western values. When he first sees Gulwirri, part of Baywara's 'wild mob', Gutjuk asks Baywara, 'Is she your woman?' and is told she is 'nobody's. Too wild that one.' (52:53). Eventually, it is Gulwirri, who belongs only to herself, who accompanies Gutjuk at the end of the film.

Like the brolgas that we hear on the soundtrack, it is suggested that a courtship has taken place and that Gutjuk and Gulwirri will mate for life. In comparison with Claire, Gulwirri is often seen in action, sure-footedly running through the undergrowth, barely covered by a pelt slung across her body, bearing and using weapons. She blends in with the rocks, grasses and trees, whereas Claire's clothes are incongruous to the setting, and mimic the social constraints on her.

As Grandfather Dharrpa leads his men and Travis from the high cave down to meet Moran, Baywara and Gulwirri look down on them, both literally and metaphorically, the young woman calling, 'You're all weak ... cowards who talk when they should fight ... You don't speak for me.' (55:20). Her violence after the rape by the three white stockmen is shocking, yet in the context of her life so far, understandable. If Claire represents purity as a respectable white woman, Gulwirri is exploited and abused sexually. As a result, 'Your anger is all you have.' (1:19:15). The film seems to suggest that in the end, Gulwirri shares in Gutjuk's decision not to kill, that she too is responding to Grandfather Dharrpa's insistence on working for a peaceful balance. At 1:11:14, as Gutjuk and Gulwirri ride together, immediately after Baywara has insisted they wait for her as 'she is one of us', there is a shot of two brolgas in the sky, calling. Perhaps this is indicative of a choice Gulwirri is making. First, she has accepted the water from Gutjuk; now the film suggests that, like the brolgas, this is their courtship ritual. This could explain the shot of the two young people on the piebald pony – half black and half white – disappearing into the distance as the credits start to roll.

Suggested classroom activities

- Students could construct a table comparing the two women, Claire and Gulwirri, and discuss the extent to which they each represent hope for the future.
- Are they both murderers?
- Which one would you rather be?

Grandfather Dharrpa (Witiyana Marika)

Witiyana Marika is one of the film's producers, a well-known Aboriginal elder and an original member of Yothu Yindi; he brings much authority to *High Ground*. He embodies the world view enunciated by Galarrwuy Yunupingu (2008):

As a clan we seek that moment in the ceremonial cycle where all is equal and in balance. Where older men have guided the younger ones and, in turn, taken knowledge from their elders; where no one is better than anyone else, everyone is equal, performing their role and taking their duties and responsibilities – then the ceremony is balanced and the clan moves in unison: there is no female, no male, no little ones and no big ones; we are all the same.

The pivotal confrontation between Grandfather Dharrpa and Moran not only lays out for the audience the two men's differences in character, but visually depicts their views and identities. Moran's white uniform belies his corrupted self, and jars with the organic greens, ochres, and browns that typify the Aboriginal elder and his men. The distance between the groups demonstrates the distance between their beliefs. Apart from the posed photograph, viewers do not see them side by side.

Grandfather Dharrpa agrees to this meeting, despite Baywara's warning that he cannot trust the white men, making the reasoned decision that 'We need to make peace.' (57:51). The fundamental differences continue to be revealed: Dharrpa bears the sacred dilly bag (lent to the filmmakers); Moran sits toadlike, his decorations crafted of metal, glinting and hard. As inflexible as the metal, Moran is concerned to punish Baywara, saying 'I didn't come here to negotiate.' (1:03:57).

It becomes clear that their definitions of the law are irreconcilable, as are their concepts of Country.

Issues and themes

Suggested classroom activities

- Ask students to list the ‘big ideas’ that the film explores; keep adding to them as students study the film in depth.
- Students might like to open their discussion of *High Ground* by considering Stephen Maxwell Johnson’s Director’s Statement, which lists these thematic ideas: ‘It’s a story of fear, treachery, heroism, sacrifice, freedom and love, misguided beliefs, an unequal study for power, and grief. But above all, it is a story about redemption and the finding of one’s roots.’ (Madman Entertainment, 2020).
- Students could discuss whether or not Johnson has merely appropriated the tropes of the American western genre and/or whether he has subverted these in any way (and for what purpose?) Consider carefully, the ways that borrowing from the western genre allows him to tell his story.
- How does Johnson, his writer and producers demonstrate the importance of storytelling in understanding a culture, its sense of itself and its place in the world?
- What stories are told by the Indigenous characters?
- What stories are told by the non-Indigenous characters?
- Are some of these stories implicit? What are the myths that the characters refer to?
- How does the film portray the stories and myths of colonial culture, particularly represented by the motif of the Bible, in comparison with the portrayal of Indigenous stories and myths?
- What does *High Ground* tell us about the value of education?

The role of the past

The shadow of World War I hangs over the characters in *High Ground*. We are continually reminded of their military experiences visually, the police uniforms easily able to be mistaken for army khaki.

The crimes of 1919 (not that the massacre was unusual historically) inform the action of 1931, with Moran insisting that the ‘mess’ be cleared up, notably not mentioning the concept of justice, while Gutjuk wants punishment visited on those guilty of murdering his family.

However, the camera reminds the audience throughout the film that the Aboriginal presence on the land is ancient and organic. The Yolgnu characters are

shown to be not only at ‘home’ in Arnhem Land, but they often blend into their landscape, emerging from grasses and pandanus, sliding into narrow caves in the escarpment. They have inhabited the land for approximately 60,000 years. They are depicted as ‘of the land’ in a way that the white intruders cannot be.

Family, and fathers and sons

One of the many ways that *High Ground* contends that the Aboriginal culture is more nurturing and cohesive than what we are shown of settler culture is in its depiction of family, and the relationships between family members. We need only to read the credits at the end of *High Ground* to become aware of the enormous amount of collective collaboration and cooperation which was responsible for the creation of this film. The list of clans, ‘our great team’, is extensive. At almost every point throughout the film, we are encouraged to admire the world view of the Yolgnu characters and to find the white settlers’ ruthlessness repugnant.

The patriarchal power that is evoked when Moran says ‘son’ is very different from the bonds which connect the First Nations characters. We can discern the opposing philosophies as embedded in the characters, most notably in the confrontation between Grandfather Dharrpa and Moran. But we also see the contrast in attitudes to the importance of family.

In the initial discussion about the ‘wild mob’, Moran admonishes Travis and Eddy, saying, ‘Son, we got through the war by sticking together, trusting each other.’ (23:57). The irony is that we see little of ‘trust’ exhibited between the white characters; Travis has just said, ‘I’d be better off shooting the two of you right now.’ (23:50). Moran does not teach and explain to his men; he keeps his strategy to himself; keeps them in the dark. His young nephew Bruce is being groomed to follow his uncle’s career, but is given no understanding of what such a life means. As a result, he is a figure of fun, and an indiscriminate ‘loose cannon’.

In great contrast, Gutjuk’s place in his clan is clear, but he must be taught to know, understand and take responsibility. He must not try to act like an adult before his time; when he does this, he deprives his family of food. His physical journey is guided by Baywara, Grandfather Dharrpa, Travis and even Gulwirri, whose anger links her to Baywara. By the end of the film, Gutjuk makes decisions alone, having absorbed the lessons taught, and now able to function independently, and above all, morally. The ending of *High Ground* suggests that he does not choose violence, but will continue to live according to Grandfather Dharrpa’s teachings.

The role of missionaries in colonialism

The film's understated rhetoric, the way the camera and soundtrack provide a continual sense of immersion in the country which is being contested, also applies to the portrayal of the mission and missionaries.

High Ground depicts two groups of white settlers in Arnhem Land: the police, many of whom are returned soldiers, and the missionaries who have come to preach and convert the Yolgnu. The extract below emphasises the gap between the Christians' avowed aims and the less salubrious reality. Although not violent in their attacks on the Yolgnu, their efforts were, in fact, directed at destroying the First Nations people's traditions, culture and very identity.

In 1914 the government actually carved Arnhem Land into different spheres of influence for the various church denominations in order to prevent overlap. The missionaries' self-perception was one of humanitarianism and being a refuge from the violent clashes between Yolgnu and settlers. For instance, the Reverend Thomas Webb in 1934 re-marked:

The settler, in his concern to secure a material return from his enterprise, has elbowed these people out of his way, has forced them into a state of confusion, with many of the age-old foundations of their life destroyed, and has left to them the impossible task of finding their unaided way amid the mazes of this profoundly changed order of things.

The self-view of benevolence among missionaries was a skewed standpoint but one with some merit. Because missionaries' aims were to proselytise and to assimilate Yolgnu, they did not embark on the campaigns of violence and massacre that had characterised earlier white incursions into Arnhem Land. (Riseman, 2008)

The two missionaries at the East Alligator River Mission Outpost are used by Stephen Maxwell Johnson to condemn what they are doing to the Indigenous inhabitants of the land they, too, have colonised.

John Braddock is more severely criticised than his sister Claire, who is seen as being hampered by her gender, in that she has almost no power at all. Braddock is an important presence in several scenes.

He is with the group of police who, in botching their confrontation with the Aboriginal group at the water hole, murder almost the entire clan. As the police take their rifles from their sheathes on the saddles, he tucks his Bible into his saddle bag. He is there to translate,

but seems complicit; is he symbolically putting his neutrality and his conscience away? The slow, appalling choreography of the killings is cut with Braddock's nausea and panic. At the very least, he is ineffectual; he cradles a dead woman in his arms, brokenly chanting: 'I am the resurrection and the life ...' (12:07). No comment is necessary – the useless incongruity of his words underlines both his culpability and the awful result of his collaboration. Once back at the mission, he staggers to the cross, which offers no solace.

Braddock is depicted as weak, less than a man, as feeble as his fragile church made of thin, tortured-looking branches. Back at the mission, it is Claire who punches Travis, accusing him, 'My brother's a mess. You're supposed to be in charge.' (17:01). While not arguing for an enshrinement of traditional masculine qualities, it is difficult to find any admirable characteristics in this minister. Later, he easily accedes to Moran's bribery – 'I'd help you get that church finally finished. Get more people in.' (29:44). The physical frailty of this structure indicates Braddock's moral frailty, his weak submissiveness. Claire's refusal of the suggestion that Gutjuk guides, or effectively will be used as bait, is dismissed. Moran says, '... it's not really your choice, is it?'

In one of the first mission scenes (25:07), one of our first sights of the now grown-up Gutjuk, called Tommy, is of him ringing the bell at the apex of the church. Braddock is attired in pristine white, ready to preach. His Bible has a gum leaf for a bookmark. As he reads from this book, the image of which vividly conjures up the massacre, we see the visible results of his missionary work.

There seems little vitality in the Aboriginal people who reside at the mission: consistently they are shown sitting on the dusty earth; they are clothed in drab European clothing displaying none of the joy and energy of the almost naked people mown down earlier. They have western food doled out to them; they do not hunt their food. And the minister reads from Isaiah 5:8 – 'What sorrow for you who buy up house after house and field after field until everyone is evicted and you live alone in the land.' Impassively, his captive congregation sits in rows in the church – the only white person Claire in the front – the vertical struts of the frame mimicking prison bars, with their backs to the forest behind. Why has he chosen this passage? What does he expect his listeners to get out of it? Is this the director telling his audience of the wrongness of invading a land and attempting to own what cannot be possessed?

This formal, alien reading can be contrasted with the stories and songlines of First Nations people. They share their stories, they teach them to the young, they hand them down through the generations, they are an intrinsic part of their experience in their physical world. They don't need an imported bell to clang in order to tell them. In all, the film suggests that even if Braddock means well, he is as responsible for the degeneration of the Yolgnu culture as are the violent settlers. And he does have a gun; Grandfather Dharrpa steals it and hands it over to Gutjuk later. It is no surprise that when Gutjuk attacks the mission that it is the church that is set alight. (1:25;51) But he does not kill anyone. Braddock has gone with Eddy, mistakenly thinking to capture Gutjuk. Ultimately, his allegiance is to the white system, and when Claire calls out to 'Tommy', she too is shown to be lacking in sensitivity to the people she works with.

Civilisation and the wilderness

One of the assumptions underlying white settlement and domination of the land and its people is that the colonial settlers saw themselves as a 'civilising' force. This is spelled out for the audience in Moran's aggressive words spat out at Travis (1:15:22). The younger man is wounded, is handcuffed to the iron bed; Moran calls him a 'mad dog', kicking the bed frame in temper. In this elemental uncontrolled frenzy, he hisses: 'You know how civilisation's built, son? Bad men. Bad men doing bad things, clearing the way for the others to follow. Bad men like me and you.'

Suggested classroom activities

- Analyse Moran's words here.
- What is the effect of Moran's use of the term 'son'?
- What is the effect of the simplified ('bad men') language he uses?
- Can we distinguish between how 'bad' he and Travis are?
- How correct is Moran when he goes on to ask: 'Whatever made you think that you could change who you are?'
- Invite students to discuss what they understand by the concept of 'civilisation'. What does *High Ground* reveal about this concept?
- List the differences between the Yolgnu and white definitions of the word. Are there any similarities?
- How does the film's shifting perspective of the camera contribute to *High Ground's* point of view on what is wild and what is civilised?

Language and style

The overarching contrast in *High Ground* is between the relationship of the First Nations people with the natural world, and that between the white settlers and their surroundings. Although we should avoid a simple binary approach, Johnson uses an array of motifs to show differences, and very few similarities.

The bush plums that Baywara teaches Gutjuk to eat in the ravine recur later in the film when Travis and Gutjuk are searching for him, and being followed by Eddy. The white men eat what seems to be disgusting canned meat; Travis initially rejects the plums, saying he 'got used to this during the war'. When Gutjuk smells the meat, he flinches, saying, 'I thought the war was over.' Despite the humour, this is another reminder of the role of the recent past on the characters, as well as the historical past of white settlement. Travis finally tastes the plums, and is pleasantly surprised, in contrast to Eddy who in the next scene is shown to be eating canned food only, despite Walter's criticism of its smell. There are further parallels: Travis is not only willing to try the bush plums, but more or less describes Eddy as his friend, while Eddy uncompromisingly says, 'He's not my mate', despite the film suggesting his fury at Travis's 'choices' (1:15:06).

Nature / birds / crocodiles / snake

The film opens with the sound of bird calls, quickly joined by singing in language. One of Johnson's means of commenting on the action is by using close-up and wide shots of a range of birds. Traditionally, in the mythologies of many different cultures, birds have represented freedom and the elevation of the human soul. In *High Ground*, we are constantly aware of the presence of birds, aurally and visually. From the time when Baywara gives Gutjuk his totems, this character is accompanied on his journeys by the hawk. 'He's watching me,' says Gutjuk, whose name means 'hawk' (5:22). Strictly speaking, there are no hawks in Australia – the birds we see and hear are kites, either whistling kites or black kites; at one point, the camera shows a black kite, but we hear the whistling kite. The 'blackfellas' of the Northern Territory call them all 'fire hawks'; fire is an important motif in the lives of First Nations people, and in the film.

Apart from the protective presence of the hawk accompanying Gutjuk, Johnson uses birds to comment on the action. After the massacre, the cries of a crow blend in with Grandfather Dharrpa's lament for his dead daughter. Her name is Wak

Wak, the crow is her totem; wak wak is the call of the crow. Soon afterwards (9:59), the elder asks the kites circling in the sky, 'What are you telling me?'

The film links the disturbance in human affairs, that is, the murder of peaceable Indigenous people by the colonial intruders on their land, with disturbances in nature. Thus, the transition between Grandfather Dharrpa's promise to his wounded son of 'I will heal you' and the future twelve years hence, is achieved by a panoramic shot of a flock of geese, honking as if spreading the news. Similarly, as Travis tells Eddy he is leaving, there is a shot of a black bird on a windblown branch as thunder crashes, indicating the disorder in the human and natural worlds (17:30).

'I am the snake' says Baywara early in the film, so that the later shot (36:19) of the Oenpelli python is significant. This python is extremely rare and is found only in Arnhem Land; it has a white sheen to it, its scales are almost iridescent. Named Narwaran by the Yolgnu, it is also associated with the rainbow serpent. The Oenpelli python is often called the ghost of Arnhem Land; in the film, Travis and Gutjuk are, in a sense, looking for a ghost in the mountains.

Fire is associated with the Indigenous characters; it is their main tool, able to destroy and to regenerate, to consume, to warm, to illuminate. Galarrwuy Yunupingu (2008), who sings the final song, says, 'I am a Gumatj man; I am fire; and that fire must burn until there is nothing left.'

The Aboriginal camps are centred around the fires that cook their food, while the food of the mission is seen as separate from any kitchen or fire pit – suggesting lack of heart/hearth. Fire's elemental quality is emphasised, part of the essence of life, with earth, water and air – all of which the white settlers seem less at home in. After the massacre, the sky is red as Grandfather Dharrpa discovers the wounded Baywara. From this point forward, anger epitomised by fire is Baywara's defining characteristic, but Grandfather Dharrpa makes it clear that by acting according to his anger and seeking revenge, he is denying his best qualities, and making peace between his people and the settlers impossible. With the fire kites as totems and guides, the film suggests that the First Nations people are guided by their connection with the life of their Country. In contrast, the horses, whose galloping hooves signal the coming of the white men, presage danger.

Although there are only a few scenes including the Bible, it does symbolise the director's condemnation of the mission (see **Themes** section).

Just as the Bible represents the preacher, John Braddock and his missionary task, we could see the rifles as representing the other whites – the police. Many of them fresh from the sanctioned killings of World War I, the police are easy to confuse with soldiers – the khaki and insignia, the literal uniformity of thought and expected behaviour, a rigidity that cannot cope with the fluid, natural, seemingly disorganised way of life of the Aboriginal communities. Thus, the massacre occurs when the colonial system of rules and orders breaks down. By the end of *High Ground*, it is clear that neither the Bible nor the rifle is the tool to bring peace with the Aboriginal population, and that the opportunity to make peace has been lost.

Students might also discuss the significance of Gutjuk throwing the bullets onto the fire, creating a distraction to lure the police from the mission. He is using fire, his tool; he is using his morality and intelligence to achieve his goals, not his rifle.

Another element, water, is a constant unifying motif that weaves through *High Ground* (though on the valley flats!). Especially important is the body of water at the base of the escarpment where an idyllic communal scene is shattered by the massacre. Water is the primordial fluid from which all life comes (Biedermann, 1996, p. 372): in this scene of domestic lushness and beauty, the violence seems worse because this secluded water hole seems like a safe place. To reinforce this horror, the film returns to the water hole (1:10:58), and Gutjuk reminds us, ‘This is where they killed my family.’

Rather than an opportunity to heal the wounds of the past, Stephen Maxwell Johnson emphasises the impossibility of doing this by repeating another killing by the water hole. Gutjuk has learned strategy from ex-soldier Travis, and he and Baywara argue. As in the earlier scene, there is a camera shot taken through the rifle crosshairs, so that the audience is aware once again of how vulnerable the Aboriginal characters are. Exerting his authority as an adult and teacher, Baywara cannot be heard by Travis when he asks Gutjuk, ‘Are you a crazy child?’, saying to the others, ‘I’m just explaining to him’. Limited to what the situation *looks* like, Travis shoots and kills Baywara.

Both echoing the initial massacre scene and, in Gutjuk’s wounding of Travis, also foreshadowing the final killing scene, the Edenic setting underscores the obscenity of what takes place there. Travis, the film says, no matter how well-meaning, cannot understand Aboriginal values and culture, and his attempts to save Baywara have turned him into his murderer. The shooting of Baywara has been foreshadowed by Travis shooting Gutjuk’s totem, the crocodile.

After the rape and the killing of the rapists which is Gulwirri’s revenge, she rejects the water offered by Gutjuk saying, ‘I don’t want their water’, but compromises and washes her face with it, moistening her lips. Perhaps this signals some change in her, softening her stance away from Baywara’s aggression to something closer to Gutjuk’s gentleness (1:09:17).

Suggested classroom activities

- The tension between high ground and the flats is an overarching presence in the film. Students could construct a running sheet which illustrates the action and ideas associated with ‘up’ and ‘down’.
- Students should list as many motifs in the film as possible, with comments showing their function.

Perspective on the text

Karl Marx wrote, in reference to a different group of disadvantaged people, that ‘They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented’ (quoted as an epigraph in Said, 1978). It is tempting to dismiss *High Ground* as a ‘northern western’ directed by a white man as an example of the sort of appropriation referred to here, with First Nations and female characters falling into the category of ‘subaltern groups’ (Jennings, 1993, p. 76).

However, the credits tell a different story, one of cooperation, communication, friendship and respect. The ‘history of appropriation and objectification’ (Jennings, 1993, p. 76) is challenged by the film, as the very language that is utilised in order to dominate and dispossess is questioned, and is demonstrated to be inadequate, firstly to describe the colonising impetus, but more importantly, to justify it. Words such as ‘law’ and ‘justice’ and ‘history’ ultimately have no common meaning to Aboriginal and non-Indigenous communities

The two ‘photograph’ scenes (analysed earlier) epitomise the exertion of white colonial invasive power over the First Nations people. Yunupingu’s doctrine of ‘both ways’ is impossible in a system defined by a formal system of rigid hierarchical tiered wielding of authority in which individual choices and judgements are not tolerated. One huge lie that we see in the film is the one that says that any white man is superior to the most noble and respected Indigenous person. The description of Gulwirri’s rapists as ‘good men’ is a chilling example of this.

High Ground continually invites the audience to view and consider what they are watching from different perspectives. The photography scenes function this way, in that the first one confuses us; the fragility of the communal idyll by the water was emphasised when the film abruptly cuts to the same view through the sniper’s crosshairs. Here, also by the water, disconcerted by a blurry reversed image created by what to us is a primitive camera, we assume that Moran’s orders – ‘Get down!’ – mean that he is wielding a gun. This generates

a connection between guns and the camera; Moran is using it to perpetuate his own power and that of those he serves, in the final instance, the ‘King’. His platitude, that ‘It’s a responsibility of those who make history to record it’, rings hollow, in the light of the ‘unrecorded’ ‘history’ made during the massacre. The first photograph poses Travis, the dead crocodile, and his Aboriginal workers side by side, which suggests equality, but is a lie, like the ‘history’ Moran is manipulating.

The second photograph has Grandfather Dharrpa’s men and the white police and settlers in the same shot, but the rest of the ‘meeting’ sequence has them facing each other, an apparently neutral camera positioned between them. Again the upside-down shot suggests wrongness, and the visual connection between both sides is extremely brief. The second picture is taken by Bruce, a true subaltern, whose mindless enthusiasm for guns and shooting bodes badly for his role in any future action, unlike Gutjuk who demonstrates an ability to think independently, in part due to the careful tutoring lavished on him.

The controlling racist colonial gaze has been disempowered by the film’s end, and it has been increasingly at risk though the entire one hour and forty-four minutes. The ‘high ground’ is occupied by the Aboriginal characters almost exclusively; the occasions when Travis and his rifle gaze down from the escarpment end in disaster – he, perhaps, cannot see the whole story? Gutjuk and Gulwirri are both dwellers of the high ground, in the end giving them a moral advantage, more important than a physical, strategic advantage.

Historically, Australian films have depicted First Nations people as the ‘other’, often depicted as mere inanimate images formed by preconceived notions, and if not racially stereotyped, then often romanticised, which is another sort of diminishment.

It can be argued that the gaze of the camera in *High Ground* treats all characters equally, as it is a gaze empowered by communal agreement, giving control of what is, and who are, seen, to the community. An opposing view would question the use of a non-Indigenous man as director.

Director Stephen Maxwell Johnson describes the film as being about a missed opportunity. In the meeting scene, Witiyana Marika as Grandfather Dharrpa lays out the essence of his people's beliefs and values: 'This is my law. It comes from the soil. From mother earth. You come from across the sea ... My law is perfect', he says (1:01:29), 'It makes us one.'

Impervious, Moran arrogantly states that 'In this country, we all abide by the same laws'; clearly his meaning is not Grandfather Dharrpa's. Then, when he mentions 'justice', Dharrpa challenges his logic: 'Then you give us our justice, for the man who killed my family.' Thus, we are reminded that in many ways, *High Ground* is an invitation to debate ideas.

The lyrics of 'Treaty' say,

*Now two rivers run their course
Separated for so long
I'm dreaming of a brighter day
When the waters will be one*

Dr M. Yunupingu argued for balance, for 'both ways'; *High Ground* also makes that argument, but leaves us doubting how possible that is.

Close study

The opening sequence (00:00 – 06:00)

In terms of plot, the lead up to the massacre functions as the prologue for the rest of the film. Its presence is constantly with us: the landscape itself reminds us, neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous characters can free themselves from it, and its violence cannot be eradicated. In the six minutes that the film takes to arrive at the scene of the massacre, it has already laid out the values associated with the Aboriginal characters, and with the white men.

- Opening drone sequence, looking down, across the land at the sacred Nimbuwa Rock, its impressive mystery enhanced by the singing in language and quite separate from the information in the title, 'Arnhem Land Northern Australia 1919'.
- The boy Gutjuk smears himself with white ochre, as he prepares to hunt with his father and uncle. In this scene, the tall luxuriant grass is vivid and nurturing, its brightness creating an effect of benign harmony between the men and boy, and nature. The soundtrack, as it is throughout the film, is dominated by birdsong – usually the call of the fire kite; there is a cut to medium shot of Gutjuk standing alone in the waist-high grass, surrounded by trees.

Suggested classroom activities

- Is there a suggestion that although his desire to hunt with the men is premature, not yet his 'place', he is in his own habitat?
- What is the effect of the sounds of birds and insects? Of the cutting between close-ups and long shots? How does our perspective change when the camera shows us that the feet treading on the leaves and rubble are those of two adult Yolgnu men?
- When Gutjuk frightens the wallaby off, the camera cuts to the sky full of honking birds disturbed; his father and uncle squat and explain to him, foreshadowing the dismissive way Bruce is treated by his uncle and other white adults. The three-shot links the men and boy; they are on the same level. This also foreshadows the later scene at the water hole in which Baywara is 'explaining' to Gutjuk, and Travis misunderstands and shoots him.

- In a scene that will flash onto the screen later, when Grandfather Dharrpa and Gutjuk are in the cave in the escarpment (01:18:01), Baywara teaches his nephew, and endows him with knowledge of his name and totems. Later, Gutjuk's reiteration of 'My name is Gutjuk' is a marker of his developing sense of identity. This scene opens with Baywara carrying the boy on his shoulders which is symbolic as well as literal, as he walks through a ravine, on its sandy floor. They pick and eat bush plums, 'They keep you going'; one of many instances of the nourishing role of nature for the Yolgnu.
- Baywara acts as a guide and instructor; he will not give the boy his spear, a warrior's extension of himself; he is 'the snake'; he grunts and sings – 'I strike like lightning'. The good humour here gives a sense of comfort and harmony between the uncle and nephew. Although Grandfather Dharrpa later says that Baywara fatally allowed himself to be dominated by his anger, he also tells Gutjuk that Baywara 'could have been our greatest teacher', a claim the filmmaker illustrates by the cut to this scene.

In this film, there are connections on every level. Later, as Travis and Gutjuk track Baywara, we remember his words, 'I am the snake', as they find his old camp with ashes in the fire pit, and as Travis, breathing heavily, panics at a sound, raising his rifle, a snake slithers along a horizontal striation of a rocky outcrop (36:19). Just as the hawk has accompanied Gutjuk on the journey, so has Baywara's totem. The shots of the snake mimic the later scene of Grandfather and Gutjuk in the cave.

Suggested classroom activities

- Why does the director choose to cut to this flashback? Are there parallels between the two scenes? What is being taught to Gutjuk? Compare this relationship with that between Bruce and his uncle.
- 'Your totem is the crocodile', Baywara tells his nephew. 'Your name is Gutjuk, means hawk.' The hawk motif is sustained throughout the film. The recurrent shots of the sky, usually with a solitary bird floating on high, punctuate Gutjuk's journey to find his uncle, his place and his identity.
- Gutjuk's other totem, the crocodile, is also associated with Travis, perhaps suggesting the lost possibility of their attaining mutual trust and understanding. Crocodiles are intelligent, patient and inscrutable; the sparse script has Gutjuk saying very little, as other characters seek to influence and persuade him. He is saved from the slaughter by submerging himself in water, using a reed to breathe, like a crocodile (12:50).

- As Baywara and Gutjuk dance and sing together, there is a series of close-ups of running legs, cut with shots of galloping hooves, cutting back to the two in the ravine as the boy joins in and they walk out into the light. The song in language continues over, until they come across the fugitives from ‘the station men’. (05:00). The horsemen appear ominous; they herald violence and death in the film.
- By the water, ‘kids shout playfully’, women talk of Gutjuk wanting to be with the men, and a wallaby roasts on the fire. As Gutjuk walks past the fire, a female voice over says, ‘He needs to learn his place.’ This is, to an extent, what the film is essentially about.
- Gutjuk listens to the men talk: ‘Station owners got the police because we killed a cow.’ (6:51) This foreshadows the situation twelve years later when a white woman has been killed, a direct result of the massacre that is about to take place.
- Cut to police tethering their horses, unsheathing their rifles, and a minister putting his Bible away in his saddle bag, a telling symbolic setting aside of his supposed moral role. When he removes his scarf, his clerical collar makes his presence even more worrying. His role is to negotiate, it seems, to tell ‘them we don’t want any trouble’, exactly what the Yolgnu men are telling the two men.
- The next section is shocking – our perspective is jarringly altered. ‘No-one shoots but him,’ orders Eddy, pointing up to the jutting rocky escarpment, and there’s a cutaway to a shot of Travis looking down on the Aboriginal encampment. We see what he sees, as he sets his sights on the unsuspecting group. If we later can find more honour and goodness in Travis’s character than in most of the other white characters, it is still difficult not to be shocked as he lines up the bathing and fishing women and children in his crosshairs. As he expresses his doubts about the behaviour of the troopers, ‘Watch them, Eddy’, the film cuts to another unruly factor, Baywara, as he insists: ‘It’s our land ... we should fight.’
- When Gutjuk screams the alarm, the slaughter begins, quick cuts indicating shock and chaos, the sound of birds escalating and adding to the panic, and the shot of white cockatoos suggesting the destruction of the innocent.

The two patriarchs meet (from 58:03)

In the central confrontation between Grandfather Dharrpa and Moran, at one point the camera rests between a side-on medium shot of each character, with their people flanking them, their different habitats framing them. But so far in the film, there has been a balance between the values of each, in the sense of both points of view being laid out for viewers, in spite of an audience clearly being encouraged to sympathise with the Yolgnu. This is the scene where the balance is clearly tipped. The camera is not neutral. The authority and dignity of Grandfather Dharrpa outweighs the spurious authority of Moran, the ‘second most senior officer’ (01:30:44), and the extent to which healing is almost impossible is demonstrated by the news of further violence.

‘Kurtz’s station’ explicitly evokes connotations of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which Kurtz represents the dark heart of colonial humanity. Throughout *High Ground*, Johnson illustrates and condemns the colonial presence. Grandfather Dharrpa had to be at the meeting. No-one can speak on behalf of an elder.

Suggested classroom activities

- This sequence begins with a posed photograph, echoing the earlier photograph (21:02). How does the director visually link the two photographs? Moran had said he was ‘record[ing] history’; to what extent does his control of the poses and camera suggest that he is concerned with both manipulating and creating his narrative? In the second photograph, Bruce, Moran’s nephew, is the photographer. How does this character embody the values found in Moran? What does it suggest about Moran’s vision of his own role, that he is now in the centre of the photograph?
- Grandfather Dharrpa and Moran both wear formal, ceremonial attire; how are the essential differences between what they stand for depicted visually?
- What is the importance of language in this sequence? Grandfather Dharrpa clearly understands English; Moran only speaks English.
- Once the photograph is taken, the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous characters are positioned facing each other. Students could construct diagrams to represent characters and relationships between them, also quoting dialogue from each leader. Is there any possibility, from what we see and hear, of the two groups finding ‘common ground’? Is there any suggestion that ‘both ways’ is possible? What do we see in the background behind Moran? Is there a sense of unity on either side? What is the role, and significance of family?

- Why does the meeting end? Is this the only reason that it has failed? Give evidence from the scene to justify your answer.

The final sequence (from 1:25:52)

Suggested classroom activities

- What is the significance of Moran's headquarters in the area being at the East Alligator River Mission Outpost?
- Why does Braddock go to help the other men when his earlier accompanying of them ended so disastrously?
- What is Stephen Maxwell Johnson suggesting by what the camera shows of this outpost? What are the buildings like?
- Compare this setting with the cave where Grandfather Dharrpa counsels Gutjuk, and with the dwellings erected by the Aboriginal communities. At the mission, slender trees are used to make fences to imprison the horses, the sound of whose galloping is a symbol of danger. The mission buildings are dark inside; the church itself as feeble as the faith of its preacher.
- Why does the camera cut to a shot of Gulwirri firing a rifle into the air? Is she no longer motivated only by anger?
- Among other things, are we invited to compare her responses here with Claire's panic as she realises the church is doomed?

Although in the preceding scenes, and in many ways all throughout the film, Gutjuk has been taught, advised and influenced by competing models of how he should live and who he is, he has said very little. It seems, by the time he levels his gun at Moran, Bruce and Travis, that he has made his decision. Still daubed in white ochre, he has a white man's weapon, the rifle, and an ammunition belt slung over his shoulder. Moran's condescending 'son' reminds us of the colonial infantilising of the black 'other', and is a subtle reminder also of the film's comparison of relationships between elders and youth.

Yet, the balance shifts again, when Travis easily disarms Gutjuk. The shot of him leaning over the boy, softly telling him to stay calm, mimics the shot of Baywara 'explaining' to him, so that Travis mistakenly shoots the other man. By insisting 'My name is Gutjuk', Gutjuk finally separates himself from his mission identity, and it is at this point that Moran levels his pistol at the 'black bastard', prompting Travis to shoot him.

- Has Travis changed? Has he made a decision, or is he the same as earlier in the film? At this moment, he instinctively chooses Gutjuk over Moran, but that has been his inclination all along.

When Eddy gallops up, having discovered that he had been lured away, there is a repeat of a 'stand off' that we have seen several times in *High Ground*, when several characters aim guns at each other. Is the director suggesting that it is difficult to judge who is superior, or that all that guns achieve is death and the perpetuation of violence?

- Why does Claire shoot Eddy? Does this act give us insight into her thoughts? Is it an act of love? She and Gutjuk embrace. Has she saved his life twice now?

Travis leaps in front of the other two when he notices Bruce aiming his gun at them.

- Has he died defending the two people who most represent what is valuable in life? Has he achieved in death something that he could not do in life, but that gives his life meaning?
- Why has Stephen Maxwell Johnson chosen Bruce to kill Travis? Is it to suggest that the killing will continue into future generations? Is he tainted with his uncle's evil? Or was Moran just doing his job? Or is the film proposing that Bruce has not been taught well, or nurtured in a loving family, or had life explained to him; he has not had Gutjuk's advantages? Is he a coward?

Already wounded in the side (does this make him a Christ-like figure?), Travis is dying from a bullet to the chest, to the heart. There is a shot of the three characters: Travis, Gutjuk and Claire, hands clasped, black intertwined with white.

The camera cuts away to three one-shots – of Gutjuk, Claire, and of Gulwirri standing beside the piebald horse, and the song 'Gapu' begins, sung by Galarrwuy Yunupingu.

Claire sits in the dust by Travis's body, with the dead Moran and Eddy nearby.

- What is the director saying here? Is there hope for the young couple astride a horse which is a mixture of dark and white? Is Claire lost and abandoned, despairing? Is there hope for her?
- And is there a possibility of peace and balance, of makarrata? Is the ending of *High Ground* ambiguous? Or pessimistic? Or optimistic?

Key quotes

‘It’s a responsibility of those who make history to record it.’ (20:48)

In one of *High Ground*’s many changes in perspective, the audience is jerked from the shooting of the crocodile to what seems a more benign situation. Disoriented by the blurred upside-down image, and the voice barking out orders, ‘Get down’, it seems a relief to realise that what is being shot is a photograph. After more orders, Moran pontificates on the ‘responsibility’ of those who ‘make history’. It is worth discussing whether we allot equal importance to this killing (of a crocodile, Gutjuk’s totem) and to the murders of his family. Is this what history in Arnhem Land in the early twentieth century consists of? What is the significance of the recording of the killing of a crocodile?

This incident foreshadows the photographing of the meeting of Grandfather Dharrpa and Moran. Once again, Moran is directing the action, just as he does throughout the film, his machinations manipulating even his own men. Once again, we see the upside-down pose of the ‘players’ in the photograph, this time realising what is happening. What is the difference between a rifle’s sight and that of the camera? How is the truth recorded? How accurate are these two photographs as an indication of ‘history’? The second photo is taken by Bruce, but the first by Moran, whom we initially see hidden by the black cloth over the camera, suggesting some sort of dark magic. In the second photograph, Moran is now part of the subject matter; he is no longer merely recording and controlling the image, but is part of the action (the story) and thinks he can control the action. Formally decked out in ceremonial white uniform, wearing medals from the King, he is unintimidated by the appearance of Grandfather Dharrpa and his men.

Students could discuss the importance of Moran’s words – the self-reflexivity of his awareness that what is happening in this time and place was, in fact, ‘history’.

‘Couple of weeks ago, they crossed a line. They killed a white woman.’ (21:55)

Moran’s words explicitly link the action of the majority of the film with the ‘mess’ created by the massacre of Gutjuk’s family in the opening section. The impetus for the slaughter had been the killing of a cow by two Aboriginal men from another clan. This suggests the value put on cattle and possessions by the colonial settlers in comparison with the lives of First Nations people.

In addition, in a culture which is predominantly male and relegates female roles to caring, lip service is paid to respecting white women; as in the American western genre, women are either civilising supportive characters, or whores. In the case of *High Ground*, the perspective of the colonial settlers is that Aboriginal women are there to be raped. It is interesting that Johnson shows his audience the outrages that white men visit on First Nations men and women, but the killing of one ‘white woman’ is merely reported, with emphasis on the response of the white male in charge. Unlike the disturbing and heartrending shots of the murdered woman and children by the water hole, Gulwirri’s violent revenge on the three white men in the rape scene is not dwelt on by the camera, making it seem less horrific than the massacre. ‘Don’t watch,’ she instructs Gutjuk. Her later description of her family all being killed because she told them ‘Boss man thought he owned me’ when she was ‘just a little girl’ goes some way to justifying Gulwirri’s claim that ‘anger is all you have.’ (01:19:20). Does violence beget violence?

If we pose this statement of Moran’s against the unspeakable crimes against Gulwirri’s and Gutjuk’s families, we are forced to consider the ongoing ramifications of the sins of the past, of the destructive effects of colonialism, and the impossibility of healing the rifts and erasing the pain between cultures. *High Ground* privileges the landscape, nature and First Nations people in moral terms against the superior power and ignorance of the imposed colonial way of life and rule, forcing us to consider what ‘civilisation’ means.

‘When you’ve got the high ground, you control everything.’ (40:02)

The film’s title is derived partially from an appropriation of Sun Tzu’s words that ‘He who occupies the high ground ... will fight to advantage’ (2006, p. 63), as ‘Being up high means your enemy must fight against both you and gravity ...’.

On their trek to find and potentially save Baywara, Travis pauses to teach Gutjuk how to shoot, reiterating: ‘When you’ve got the high ground, you control ... when to engage.’ He specifically links occupying the dominant position with being able ‘to save your uncle’s life ... while I’m in control ...’.

Figuratively, the high ground conveys the impression of moral purity and superiority, and the film does set Travis apart from the other white men, all of whom are either corrupt or compromised. Yet, throughout the film, this supposed ethical superiority is consistently linked with, and accompanied by, guns. Add to this the so-called controlling position we first see Travis in, as he looks through the crosshairs of his rifle at Gutjuk’s tribe, and the absolute lack of control he has over the ensuing violence initiated by the white men, and it is hard not to disagree with his later admission to Baywara, that he doesn’t ‘think’ he can guarantee the safety of Baywara’s family, in spite of earlier asserting he will ‘do things my way.’

Consistently, the audience literally views this film from the high ground. From the opening sequence to the closing scene, the panoramic shots of the natural landscape create a sense of a vast perspective, perhaps similar to that of Gutjuk and his clan as they view and consider their Country. Physically, viewers are positioned to share their way of seeing, and of comprehending, encouraged by the camera to identify with the concept of the land as a presence with which to live in harmony, rather than a domain to own.

One of *High Ground*’s key thematic concerns is centred on Gutjuk, whose identity and choices are traced throughout the film. He embodies the tension between the natural organic existence of his clan and the white ‘civilisation’ that has been imposed upon it. He is often filmed literally standing on the high ground, as he ponders the significance of what is happening. From parroting Travis’s words, ‘You stay on the high ground, you see everything ... He [Travis] told me control is everything’, he comes to a more complex understanding by the end of the film. ‘Taught’ by Travis, Claire and the mission, Baywara, and Grandfather Dharrpa, he ultimately comes to a decision, symbolised by his dropping the ammunition belt into the dust, and rides away from the carnage at the mission, with Gulwirri. Gulwirri is another character often shot looking down, implying her moral superiority, ‘You think like a white man’ (1:13:15), and literally, as she calls Grandfather Dharrpa and the other men ‘weak ... cowards.’ (58:04). It is possible to argue that the director, Johnson, ultimately dismisses Travis’s claim about control, but does endorse a peaceful relationship between all aspects of life. That non-Indigenous people find this almost impossible to comprehend, given that even well-meaning ones are destructive, connects back to the whole premise of *terra nullius*, suggesting that there is no hope.

The idea of ‘control’ that Travis explains comes with a position on the high ground is ultimately discarded in its literal sense by Gutjuk, and is inadequate for a way of response to life. It is the First Nations people who occupy the high ground in this film, but not in order to shoot.

‘I’m not sure that anyone gets to choose what kind of man they’re going to be.’ (43:00)

Travis’s response to Gutjuk’s assertion that Baywara ‘if he had a chance, he’ll be a different kind of man’ directs our attention to one of *High Ground*’s central concerns: the choices that we are faced with, and the inescapable consequences of our decisions and actions, and the idea of how we can live with honour, especially in an unjust and racist world. A comparison of Travis and Baywara suggests that each has acted in a way consonant with his moral code, and each has paid the price for that lonely conviction by being abandoned by his clan. There are, of course, many differences: we could argue that Travis’s values are superior to those to which Moran cynically refers when he contends that ‘Travis has no sense of duty, no sense of loyalty’. The film suggests that Travis is more ethical in basic human terms than Moran, and that serving an evil system is neither dutiful nor loyal.

When Eddy looks down at Travis, who has been wounded by Gutjuk, he says, ‘We gotta talk about your choices, mate.’ The film suggests that the damage done to those who engaged in the slaughter that was World War I still affects them; however, Travis attempts to face what actions mean, and to live with honour, while Eddy has not changed from his role as a spotter – that is his identity, still. He is almost jealous when Travis rides off with Gutjuk, his opinions are conventionally racist and limited. He sees Travis as betraying the white men, and feels betrayed himself; like Baywara and Gulwirri, until the end, he is dominated by his anger, and still imprisoned by narrow, mindless military rules.

Like a true western hero, Travis makes choices that result in his death, but which endow his existence with meaning and dignity. The film ultimately suggests that the wounds of the land and its people cannot be healed, but by saving Claire’s life, he has died nobly, and *High Ground* ends with both women alive, and presumably expected to generate a new generation.

‘See this crown, on the badge? That represents the King.’ (1:03:07)

Moran’s words open the meeting with Grandfather Dharrpa. Immediately, Johnson undercuts this claim to authority with a shot of one of the Aboriginal men looking uncomprehendingly at the camera, of Aboriginal women sitting, their bodies covered by drab voluminous dresses, idle, and of Indigenous men also seated wearing European clothing, all passively looking up at what is occurring. This is what the King’s control of their land and lives has given them. Gutjuk’s translation of Moran’s words further diminishes the dignity asserted by the policeman: ‘See the shiny thing on his hat? Makes him think he’s boss.’

As the two men talk, their language further emphasises the gaps between their perceptions of their roles and values. Grandfather Dharrpa speaks of family, the land and the law as being organic, intrinsically connected, while Moran’s concept of law is foreign, rigid, hierarchical, imposed on the natural patterns of life, and as the film shows, all too subject to being a means to violence and corruption. He goes on to explain that he is ‘duty bound to uphold this law’, unlike the First Nations’ inherent adherence to their concept. Moreover, Moran’s methods are devious, manipulative and ruthless – pragmatic and amoral, as the action of the film demonstrates.

Analytical text response topics

1. *High Ground* ultimately argues that it is impossible to escape the sins of the past.
To what extent do you agree?
2. How does *High Ground* explore its characters' relationships with their natural surroundings?
3. *High Ground* argues that knowing who you are, one's identity, is crucial.
Discuss.
4. How does *High Ground* suggest that we cannot tell another culture's stories?
5. *High Ground* suggests that we must make careful choices.
Discuss.
6. 'In *High Ground*, good intentions can be as destructive as evil ones.'
Discuss.
7. *High Ground* leaves us uncertain as to what civilisation is.
Discuss.
8. To what extent does *High Ground* demonstrate that peace is impossible if some groups in society are not treated equally?
9. To what extent does *High Ground* suggest that a just society can only be achieved through balance?

Creative text response tasks

‘A creative response to a selected text in written or oral form with a written explanation of decisions made in the writing process and how these demonstrate understanding of the text.’ (VCAA, 2021).

Although there are two parts to this task, they are not assessed separately, and together form a cohesive response.

Suggested classroom activities

- Students should keep written notes on the process of their writing, so that they can justify and spotlight their ultimate writing decisions and changes. The written explanation is an opportunity to emphasise and explain the strengths and nuances of the writing.
- The essence of this task requires students to write creatively in order to explore, analyse and develop perception into the original text.
- Possible choices include: filling in gaps from the text; giving a voice to a character who does not have one in the film; a monologue (remembering that most characters say very little in *High Ground*), an epilogue or prologue, either as a script or short story. Students could brainstorm together to create lists of possibilities.
- The written explanation is integral to this task because it is about how we write.

Students should consider: form, purpose, language, audience and context. In general:

- Control of form – what frameworks and structures do you need to include? What voice, style and approach is most appropriate for your chosen form?
- Authenticity of voice and understanding of characters – you need to demonstrate sound understanding of characters’ personality/ perspectives/outlook, and speech patterns.
- What are you adding? Do not reproduce the original.
- Work with recurring motifs

Students need to be able to justify their choices as appropriate for their aims. A detailed journal of ideas and decisions will make this easier. What figurative language will be used? How will the film’s metalanguage be used?

Lots of class discussion and sharing of ideas will help, and shortish writing sessions in class will contribute to steady progress and ease of authentication.

Suggestions for creative tasks

1. Gutjuk and Bruce: Might they meet up in the future? How have their lives developed? What situation might they meet in? How does this develop the ideas, language and mood of *High Ground*? If Gutjuk’s totem is the fire kite, would Bruce have one? What has been the influence of the two uncles, and the grandfather? The setting and landscape?
2. Write a script for an epilogue, picking up the shot of Claire at 1:30:56. What possible future could Stephen Maxwell Johnson be suggesting for her? Is she collateral damage? What unspoken communication took place with Gulwirri?
3. A prologue.
4. Use the gap between 1919 and 1931. How can Stephen Maxwell Johnson’s directorial concerns be explored here? What important events might have taken place?
5. A scene years later ‘down south’ in which Claire meets Gutjuk and Gulwirri. Why would they be there? Did she leave the north, being too damaged to continue?
6. Gutjuk spends a lot of *High Ground* watching and listening. Write his monologue, spoken just after the end of the film.
7. Bruce’s early life: Why is he in Arnhem Land? Is it simple nepotism?
8. Contemporary Northern Territory newspaper reports and/or opinion pieces, firstly of the 1919 slaughter, then of the killings twelve years later. What would be the predominant values of such publications? Would a reporter have been dispatched to the scenes? Would they have any interaction with the Yolgnu people? Whose voice would be heard?
9. Bruce’s monologue about the Arnhem Land landscape.
10. The rest of Grandfather Dharrpa’s life.
11. A series of songs that tell the story, sung and illustrated multimodally.

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