

# Re-animating the Thylacine: Narratives of Extinction in Tasmanian Cinema

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**Abstract:** *The thylacine looms large in Tasmanian culture. The animal's image is everywhere, present on everything from beer labels to licence plates. The documentary footage of the last thylacine in Hobart Zoo has come to exemplify, among other things, the tragedy of species loss and humanity's violence against the nonhuman. This footage features at the beginning of both *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* – two of the very small number of films that constitute a notional Tasmanian cinema. In contrast to the meanings suggested by the documentary images of the last thylacine however, the fictional Tasmanian tiger in these films becomes a repository for those aspects of humanity that need to be expunged. In *The Hunter*, the thylacine's dead body is potential raw material for weapons production by a biotech company. In *Dying Breed*, the thylacine is aligned with a cannibalistic community – implicitly descendent from cannibal convict Alexander Pearce – who rape female tourists in order to perpetuate their kind. In these two texts the thylacine therefore symbolically embodies humanity's inhumanity, degeneracy, and monstrosity – qualities that *The Hunter* gestures towards wiping out through the eponymous hero's enactment of the thylacine's 'final' extinction. The narratives of *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* assert man's right to violently determine survival and reproduction. These politics resonate with the thylacine's history both in terms of the significance of the hunt in her extinction and the confinement of the last thylacine in a zoo – an environment where reproduction is fully governed by humans.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** *thylacine; Dying Breed; The Hunter; critical animal studies; reproduction; extinction*

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*'... just hunting and killing, waiting to die' – The Hunter*

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The thylacine is a central protagonist in two of the very small number of films that constitute a notional Tasmanian cinema, Daniel Nettheim's *The Hunter* (2011) and Jody Dwyer's *Dying Breed* (2008).<sup>2</sup> This creature's vernacular name, the Tasmanian tiger, signals the specific regional significance of the animal in Australia's southernmost state. While once found throughout Australia and New Guinea, the thylacine became extinct on mainland Australia approximately 2000 years ago ('Tasmanian Tiger'). In contrast, thylacines were still found in Tasmania until the 1930s and have come to be a repository for discourses about the island. Driven to extinction by humans, the tiger is part of Tasmania's broader violent past, which incorporates conflict between European settlers and Aboriginal people as well as the removal and resettlement of much of the Aboriginal population, and Tasmania's history as Australia's most brutal penal settlement.

This regional context makes *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* fertile ground for an examination of the interrelationship of the domination of both animals and those humans situated as less-than-human. Consequently our paper mobilises an intersectional analysis, an approach deployed in both feminism and critical animal studies to foreground the relation of categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability and species in the performative construction and enactment of identities; or, as Richard Twine writes, the intersectional approach is one 'that attempts to outline interdependencies between social categories of power' (398). The thylacine provides a particularly apposite case-study for thinking through discourses in the construction of the human-animal relationship, bringing together multiple points of interconnection including zoos, museums, farming, laboratory science, hunting, and the exploitation of animals as metaphors in the delineation of the human as a category. In its analysis of filmic texts, this article participates in the work Nicole Shukin calls for in her book *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, where she critiques the instrumentalisation of both material and symbolic animals to capitalist ends:

Given the soaring speculation in animal signs as a semiotic currency of market culture at the same time that animals are reproductively managed as protein and gene breeders under chilling conditions of control, an interrogation of animal capital in this double sense – as simultaneously sign and substance of market life – emerges as a pressing task of cultural studies.

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Our analysis engages with the idea that the human use of animals both in representation and also in material practices operate on a continuum, which works to shore up the human as a site of exclusion, privileging some humans while situating others – such as women and the disabled – as closer to the animal. Conversely this discursive practice contributes to the hyperseparation of the human and the animal.

Our argument is divided into three parts. In order to contextualise the representation of the thylacine in *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed*, we begin by historicising the Tasmanian tiger in its regional context. This section also addresses the reduction of nonhuman animals to mere specimens – both alive and dead – and reflects on questions of violent human intervention in animal existence and reproduction. We go on to expand on these themes with more specific reference to the thylacine in the context of *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed*. In section two, we examine how the thylacine is mobilised in the performative construction of the human in our chosen texts before engaging, in the final section of the article, with the biopolitical aspects of life, reproduction, and extinction in the two films.

### **A Textual Creature**

The thylacine looms large in Tasmanian culture. The animal is represented on the Tasmanian Coat of Arms and the state government logo. Thylacine imagery is ubiquitous, present on everything from beer labels to license plates to graffiti. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) has a special display devoted to the Tasmanian tiger. This display functions almost as a shrine to the animal. It is located in a small, darkened room, separated from the museum's larger natural history collection. The exhibit includes a taxidermy specimen, a pelt, skeletal remains, traps and snares, photographs of a hunter and a farmer with dead thylacines, and photographs and documentary footage of thylacines held in captivity. The items in the room

strongly (if incidentally) reference the story of early zoo animals who were violently hunted for zoo captivity.<sup>3</sup> The status of these animals as objects is made explicit when they become remnants in museums: inanimate and twice displaced (once from the wild, once from the cage) (see Benbow). The footage of thylacines lying, being coaxed into activity, or restlessly pacing in bare enclosures illustrates how zoos once reduced animals to what Agamben would call ‘bare life’ (8).<sup>4</sup>

The TMAG exhibit also inadvertently points to zoos’ complicity in species destruction. In the case of the thylacine, the ‘last’ captive individual died at the Hobart Zoo in 1936.<sup>5</sup> Government legislation of 1888 had put a bounty on the head of thylacines (one pound per adult and ten pence per young) and between 1888 and 1909, when the scheme ceased, the Government made in excess of 2000 payments. Tasmanian tigers were by this point very rare, however their value as museum specimens and zoo exhibits ensured that they would continue to be hunted, captured and killed. Their ability to recover their numbers in the wild would have been further undermined by the fact that mothers with pouch young fetched a premium with museums and zoos (Menzies et al).

The thylacine exhibit at TMAG therefore functions not only to indicate the animal’s importance in the natural history of the state, but also operates as a metonym for the tragedy of species loss more broadly.<sup>6</sup> As the museum visitor reads: ‘the story of the thylacine is a powerful reminder of how easily a species can be lost.’ On the surface, the exhibit therefore functions to memorialise. At the same time, the display signifies a history of human interaction with animals – a relationship epitomised in the institution of the zoo – where human domination of nonhuman animals is routinely and violently re-asserted. At TMAG, the presentation of the documentary footage of the thylacine points to the performative construction of animals as things rather than individual beings in that no information accompanies this material to delineate who these tigers were, where they were being held, and when the footage was shot. They are absent referents. Their individuality and specific circumstances are irrelevant. They were and remain mere specimens of the species, reflecting the species-thinking that informs zoos, whereby ‘each individual is only perceived as a token of its inexhaustible taxonomic type’ (Chrulew).

During the thylacine's lifetime, the largest marsupial carnivore of modern times was conceived as a mythic and monstrous creature, mitigating the 'justice' meted out to the animal. The hunting of the tiger was initially based on the misrepresentation of the thylacine as a major predator of 'livestock' – an argument first concocted and popularised by the VDLC (Van Diemen's Land Company) to cover up for mismanagement of land in the State's northwest (Smith 273). This myth of the thylacine as competitor with humans and as undermining human industry was sustained by photographs such as the much reproduced image from 1921 of a Tasmanian tiger apparently eating a live chicken. Carol Freeman argues convincingly that this photo was staged using a stuffed specimen and is no more than propaganda (219).

The thylacine's body itself became the site of the animal's demonisation. Many of the interpretations of the thylacine's morphology – 'opossum hyaena, [...] zebra-wolf, zebra-opossum and tiger-wolf' (Smith 274) – in both scientific discourses and the popular imagination evoke the animal as a freakish and unnatural hybrid. The animal's scientific name alone indicates morphological confusion: *Thylacinus cynocephalus* means pouched dog with a wolf's head. An admixture of spurious scientific claims and superstitious beliefs developed, the most extreme manifestation of which was the idea that the thylacine had vampiric qualities with unnatural and blood-thirsty feeding habits. Geoffrey Smith was the first to publish the claim that the tiger fed on blood. In 1909 he wrote: 'a Tiger will only make one meal of a sheep, merely sucking the blood from the jugular vein or perhaps devouring the fat round the kidneys' (qtd in Paddle 34). This notion of the thylacine's blood-feeding habits persisted in scientific publications and popular literature until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within this literature is the gruesome account given by University of Tasmania zoologist Eric Guiler of a 1957 sheep massacre:

They found that the sheep had been killed by a lone animal, and all had been savaged in a most unusual manner – all three had had their throat, lower jaw and most of their face eaten away. In each case there was no obvious trace of blood ... A lamb was found in the same property, with only its liver and parts of its rib cage removed. (qtd in Bagust 96)

The thylacine has therefore always been a social and cultural construction, even prior to its extinction. Implicit in the TMAG exhibit is the notion that the thylacine might still be in existence. However the display does acknowledge that even if there were still individual members of the species living in the Tasmanian wilderness, their numbers would be insufficient

for their population to recover. Our engagement with the thylacine in the present day is therefore confined to museum relics and the cultural production through which the species is imagined.

### **‘There’s something out there, in the trees’**

The mediation of the Tasmanian tiger is foregrounded in both Nettheim’s *The Hunter* and Dwyer’s *Dying Breed* with documentary footage of captive thylacines featuring prominently at the opening of the films. Both of these texts frame this documentary footage as containing images of the ‘last’ tiger. In *The Hunter*, for example, the footage is of a tiger in Hobart Zoo in 1933. As this was the year the ‘last’ thylacine was delivered to the zoo, this is implicitly the same animal.

*The Hunter*, based on Julia Leigh’s 1999 prize-winning debut novel of the same name, is the story of Martin David (Willem Dafoe) who has been hired by German military biotech company Red Leaf to locate and collect samples from what is now believed to be the last thylacine. Within the film’s diegesis, the value of this biological material is that it contains toxins that can be used in the production of weaponry. Martin travels to a remote community in the south-west of Tasmania that is divided by the politics of logging into two distinct groups: the ‘environmentalists’ – ready to sell out and hunt the tiger themselves if the government pays them to do so – and the ‘loggers’ – macho, white, working-class men. Martin establishes the base of his secret operation at the house of Lucy (Frances O’Connor), formerly a PhD student in plant science. Lucy abandoned her studies to live in the isolated community with her environmentalist husband Jarrah, missing in the bush, and their children, who call themselves Sass (Morgana Davies) and Bike (Finn Woodlock). Martin divides his time between this domestic location, in which he becomes increasingly invested, and his lone pursuit of the last thylacine in the Tasmanian wilderness.

*Dying Breed* is a horror film about Nina (Mirrah Foulkes), an Irish zoologist. Haunted by the death of her sister in Tasmania’s western wilderness eight years earlier, Nina embarks on a journey that is both an investigation of her sibling’s grisly end and a hunt for the thylacine. She is accompanied by her partner Matt (Leigh Whannell), Matt’s obnoxious friend Jack (Nathan

Phillips), and Jack's girlfriend Rebecca (Melanie Vallejo). The film chronicles their expedition to a backwater town and their growing awareness that things are not right in this community.

In both of these films the thylacine is co-opted and exploited as a repository for a range of discourses about the human. In *Dying Breed* human violence and degeneracy are reflected through the representation of an inbred, cannibal human community co-existing with blood-thirsty Tasmanian tigers. This relationship between human and nonhuman animal is symbiotic: at the opening of the film, the infamous cannibal convict Alexander Pearce, the 'Pieman', is shown kicking a morsel he has bitten from a human officer to a waiting thylacine.<sup>7</sup> The thylacine later functions to lure tourists and environmentalists to the town, where they will be murdered and eaten or raped.<sup>8</sup> In *The Hunter* the thylacine's dead body is prospective raw material for weapons production and therefore, as in *Dying Breed*, the tiger embodies humanity's inhumanity, degeneracy, and monstrosity – qualities that *The Hunter* gestures towards wiping out through the eponymous hero's enactment of the thylacine's 'final' extinction.

In both *Dying Breed* and *The Hunter*, human and nonhuman animal bodies are paralleled in ways that imagine humans as 'beastly' and simultaneously reinforce the animal as below consideration. In *Dying Breed*, the (real and imagined) qualities of the tiger are transposed onto the bodies of the degenerate community who are coded as animal. This elision is unambiguously figured in the depiction of the filed-down, sharp teeth of the most explicitly cannibalistic character, a little girl called Katie. These teeth, which are only revealed in one of the final scenes of the film, evoke her as a predatory carnivore and therefore atypically human. Indeed it is through the acquisition and consumption of meat that human and animal communities are aligned. Here, *Dying Breed* plays on a range of mythic discourses about the Tasmanian tiger's hunting and eating habits.<sup>9</sup> Echoing popular stories about the tiger's gory and vampiric habits and predilections, the community's degeneracy is depicted through unnatural appetites and feeding practices: Alexander Pearce, the community's ante-cedent, kills by biting open his victim's jugular; the cannibals take obvious pleasure in dismembering their prey; the cannibal most visually marked as inbred, Rowan, bites Rebecca's face off; Katie feeds on the chest of a live and helpless male victim. The depiction of unnatural meat consumption is exacerbated in this film when non-cannibalistic protagonists take pleasure in consuming pies that are implicitly made of human meat. *The Hunter* also reproduces mythic notions of the tiger's

feeding habits: when Martin is showing Bike pictures of remains of the tiger's prey he notes that the carcass bears all the hallmarks of a tiger kill, noting that 'she eats the heart first'.

From the outset, thylacine and cannibal are paralleled in *Dying Breed*. The opening documentary footage of the captive animal is not deployed to engender a sense of pathos at the loss of the creature. The foreboding soundtrack accompanying the footage and a subsequent depiction of Pearce's escape from captivity with the assistance of the tiger – implicitly the thylacine savages the vicious guard dogs hunting the convict – position the animal as a brutal predator to be feared. *Dying Breed* frequently goes so far as to elide the distinction between thylacines and cannibals. As in many horror films, the viewer is often led to believe that 'something' is lurking in the bushes. The subject of point-of-view shots is often ambiguous, however, and it is implied that this 'something' could be human or nonhuman and, in fact, that the distinction between the two is fundamentally immaterial. At other times, cannibals and tigers are seamlessly substituted for each other, such as when Rebecca is lured into the bushes by a tiger-sighting only for us to later see Rowan chewing on her foot. In evoking the gory conventions of the horror genre, *Dying Breed* exploits the thylacine by playing on and to the tiger's mythic history as 'beastly' and 'monstrous' in order to further exaggerate the unregenerate nature of a human community. The tiger the film deploys is that which colonial settlers vilified and hunted to extinction and which zoological gardens and museums displayed as antipodean 'perversions of nature' (Freeman, *Paper Tiger* 9).

The intersection of discourses concerning human and nonhuman animal in *The Hunter* is equally problematic but far more subtle and insidious than in *Dying Breed*. This text makes explicit the correlation between the human domination of the nonhuman and the male domination of women. In this film Lucy, the female love-interest, figures as wilderness and wild animal and is specifically doubled with the thylacine. Early in the film, Lucy is predominantly tranquilised and contained, separated from her children and other members of the human species by her 'keeper', Jack Mindy (Sam Neill). She is rehabilitated by another male figure, Martin. He interrupts the flow of tranquilisers to her body, yet does not facilitate her re-acquisition of agency. Rather, in assuming the dominant role in the family, he replaces Mindy as Lucy's custodian.



More specifically than just being a wild animal, Lucy is paralleled with the tiger herself. Martin pursues Lucy as he does the tiger – which he assumes to be female – and both are framed as objects of his desire. In the special features on the DVD copy of *The Hunter*, the director describes Martin's pursuit of the thylacine as a sublimated form of his desire for Lucy. However we could also read his pursuit of Lucy as a sublimation of his desire for the tiger. This doubling problematically figures the romance plot as a hunting narrative drawing out the relationship between hunting and heterosexuality, which, as Karyn Pilgrim suggests, objectifies both women and animals and also feminises meat (120). She explicitly describes hunters' rhetoric as constructing a ritual of violent seduction whereby the animal 'comes on' to the hunter leading to the animal's bloody death. This conflation then 'provides a structural framework for predational relationships in these men's sexuality with women' (Pilgrim 120).<sup>10</sup> Consistent with this logic, in *The Hunter*, both Lucy (and her daughter) and the tiger meet with violent ends that they were 'asking for'. This resonates with *Dying Breed* where Nina and her sister are both evoked as animals and, specifically, hunted prey: An inhabitant of Sarah observes of Nina's sister, 'When a bitch is on heat she'll go out of her way to mate. That's how it is'; multiple women in this film are hunted through the bush, with the cannibals noting prior to pursuing Rebecca, 'she'll be easy to track'. In *The Hunter*, Martin himself notes to Bike that the thylacine is probably alone, 'just hunting and killing, waiting to die'. This logic frames the tiger's death as an inevitable one and works to justify that death. Similarly, Lucy's death is construed as the predictable outcome of her housekeeping practices. As Jack disingenuously notes after Lucy and her daughter are burnt alive, 'all the candles and lanterns, open fire up at that place. It was bound to happen sooner or later.'

Like the tiger's den, Lucy's abode is a wild and unkempt lair. The absence of markers of civilisation such as power and hot water position the family as living beyond human comfort and propriety. Lucy's house is also a place of wonder and play for the children who, largely unsupervised, live by their own rules, sleeping in the lounge room, routinely using the word 'fuck' and giving themselves new names: Sassafras and Bike. Existing in a liminal space literally on the margins of civilisation, not bound by societal rules, Lucy and her children symbolise wilderness,<sup>11</sup> which according to traditions in Western thinking is irrational and chaotic, the inferiorised opposite of the rational urban environment and the ordered, productive pastoral (Narraway; Plumwood, 'Wilderness Skepticism' 655–56).<sup>12</sup>

Martin arrives in Tasmania as a civilising force. Although an American, we can read Martin as a representative of the imperial Old World as Red Leaf, his employer, is a German company. He exercises his power by subduing women and children on one hand and the thylacine on the other. On the domestic front, he imposes order on Lucy's household: he cleans (his first civilising act is to clean the bath), he cooks, he (incidentally) bathes children, and he rehabilitates Lucy, returning her to her role as mother. By fixing the generator, Martin literally brings modernity (back) to Lucy's home as the house and garden are lit up by electric lights and the stereo starts playing again. Music is in fact perhaps the most obvious marker of Martin as representative of the rational, civilised imperial centre. He constantly listens to European classical music. Moreover, within Lucy's house he replaces the left-wing strains of Bruce Springsteen, representative of the American working man, with the high culture compositions of Handel and Dvořák. One of the most significant musical moments of the film comes when Martin repairs outdoor speakers and subsequently broadcasts Vivaldi's 'Gloria' across Tasmania's western wilderness. This seemingly benign and beautiful moment marks the point of his successful re-structuring of the family unit. Furthermore, the stunning image of Tasmanian bush overwhelmingly accompanied by Vivaldi signifies the colonisation of the wild. As we have already witnessed when Martin checks and loads his gun while enjoying opera, high, European culture is associated in the film with violence and domination. This moment therefore speaks to a broader history of European domination of Australia, and Tasmania more specifically, and its original inhabitants. Problematically, the seductive beauty of this scene consequently romanticises western, imperial hegemony.

### **Governed Life, Governed Reproduction**

Both *The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* depict life as something that is governed by patriarchal logic. In *Dying Breed*, this idea manifests through the depiction of reproduction, with the text expressing disquiet about fertility and the continuation of bloodlines. The title of the film alone conveys this concern and it is graphically represented in the opening credits, where the red text *Dying Breed* is formed out of magnified blood cells. This sequence also depicts branching arteries and capillaries forming the structure of a pedigree chart. The community at Sarah is represented as lacking genetic diversity, replicating the fact that Tasmanian tigers were

inbred due to geographical isolation from thylacine communities on the mainland. As a consequence of their limited gene pool, Tasmanian tigers would have been prone to ‘reduced fertility, lower birth rates, higher infant mortality, and general inability to adapt to changes in the environment’ (‘*The Hunter* and biodiversity in Tasmania’). The community at Sarah understand that they share with the tigers both a struggle to survive and also issues with genetic diversity. For some, including Harvey, the apparent community leader, the careful management of the town’s breeding programme enables them to stay pure. At the very end of the film Harvey tells Matt (who has come to realise his fate and that of Nina): ‘it’s hard to stay pure...like your tiger. There’s so few of us left. Things have to stay hidden...to survive.’ This purity is both about preserving the cannibal lineage that has descended from Alexander Pearce and also appears to be racially motivated. It is significant that the community at Sarah choose Nina, the white Irish woman, over Rebecca, the darker-skinned woman, to be the breeder for their community. Not only does this community keep the bloodline within the family (their last breeder was Nina’s sister) but also, being of Irish heritage, they keep it within a particular national history and, being Caucasian, within the ‘race’. This speaks to a problematic racial politics within this film, reflecting Australian colonial history, where white bodies are proliferated and darker bodies ‘erased’.

Some members of the town are troubled by the community’s inappropriate reproductive practices. This anxiety is most pronounced with the older woman who tries to dissuade Nina and her friends from staying in the town. When Nina later finds her covered in blood and beheading puppies, the woman coldly states: ‘the parents were brother and sister. I tried to keep them apart...I warned them this would happen. Always does.’ Nonetheless, despite efforts to improve their ‘stock’, the community at Sarah clearly remains an example of, in Jack’s words, ‘the shallow end of the fucking gene pool’.<sup>13</sup>

The central horror of *Dying Breed* is the realisation that Nina’s sister was the unwilling mother of the cannibal child, a position that Nina assumes at the end of the film when she is captured and bound with the implication that her routine rape will now continue the cannibal bloodline. The explicit concern with breeding in *Dying Breed* codes women’s reproductive capacity, much like that of captive (and particularly endangered) animals, as their destiny. Harvey notes: ‘You know you want this. Your sister, she did. She was a good breeder. Fertile. As you are. For the good of the family.’ Motherhood, which is violently forced on the women in

this film, becomes inevitable but is nothing more than functional. Women's bodies are vehicles for male pleasure and vessels for their offspring. As breeders these women are aligned with 'livestock' and replicate the relationship of control that the human has with nonhuman life in farming, zoos and other breeding programmes. At the same time, their teeth are removed, reinforcing passivity, stopping these women biting – be it in self-defence or in partaking in the meat-eating that the text encodes as pleasurable.<sup>14</sup> The only females who evade these gendered constructions are the cannibal girl and her step-mother. Significantly, neither is of breeding age: one is too young, one too old.

While *Dying Breed* appears to set up a polarity between the predominantly male cannibal community and men from the outside world, we see both vie for control over women's bodies. During the film's only consensual sex scene – which is extended and gratuitous – the couple, Jack and Rebecca, realise they are being watched by one of the community: Gareth, a man with whom Jack has already had conflict over their cars. Jack chases Gareth away, beats him and then ties him up with barbed wire. Although at the start of the beating it seems that Jack is more upset about his car, his focus soon shifts to his woman, aligning the two as his possessions. He calls Gareth a 'pervert' and tells him 'that's my girlfriend'. Jack's response is excessive and sadistic and exposes overlapping appetites for violence amongst men coded mainstream and those who are coded perverse. The continuum between the cannibals and the mainstream is literalised when Matt and Nina return to their room and, as part of a thwarted sexual advance, he places his hand on her leg. The film then cuts to a shot of Harvey touching her in the same way in the bar. Furthermore, Nina says to Rebecca after Jack returns from beating Gareth: 'I don't know what unnerves me more – the locals, or Jack.'

In *The Hunter*, Martin determines the right to reproduce through his definitive decision regarding the right to survive.<sup>15</sup> Although Martin can be read to stand in for the human as a biopolitical force more broadly, this is also specifically gendered. Knowledge of the thylacine's whereabouts is framed as something that is passed between men in the text. Not only are all employees of Red Leaf male, but Martin is also told where the tiger is by Bike, information that Bike has received from his father. The future of the animal is therefore in the hands of men. After the Red Leaf operative murders Lucy by burning her house down, the embittered Martin returns to the wilderness to hunt the tiger for the last time. When he finally encounters the thylacine, he gets the tiger in his rifle's sights then lowers his gun. Animal and man exchange a

protracted look before Martin raises the rifle and shoots and kills the thylacine. Because this tiger is framed as the last tiger, his decision to kill this animal is more than the killing of an individual, it is the termination of the species. Moreover, because the thylacine was already considered extinct, his act is one of knowing re-extinction.

Carol Freeman makes much of this moment in her reflection on the adaptation of this text from Leigh's novel. She notes that in the book the tiger is feeding when Martin finds the animal and that after he kills the tiger he harvests the specimens he had been contracted to collect ('Last Image' 190). However, in the film the thylacine's death is rendered with much greater ambivalence. After killing the tiger, Martin mourns the loss of life. This grieving is depicted first through a shot of him sobbing at the dead animal's side, and then through the funeral rites he enacts: he burns the thylacine's body and scatters the ashes at a picturesque location in the Tasmanian wilderness. For Freeman, this adaptation is motivated by an environmentalist agenda; Martin's mourning is humanity's mourning for species loss and may indicate a 'new sensitivity toward species extinction' ('Last Image' 190). Our reading of the text locates significantly less hope in the resolution of Martin's hunt.

As a film about species extinction, *The Hunter* offers viewers a perverse logic to justify the tiger's death as both necessary and inevitable. Martin's observation that the thylacine is 'alone, just hunting and killing, waiting to die' points to the fact that as the last thylacine, and therefore not able to reproduce, the extinction of this animal is an inevitability. Within this logic the killing is erased. Martin has done no more than speed up nature. Moreover, this act of killing is done in the name of Man. While *The Hunter* frames the killing as an ethical end to the hunt, sparing the tiger from perpetual pursuit, Martin ultimately kills the thylacine because in the wrong hands the animal can be used to make weapons to kill other humans. The hunt for the thylacine has already claimed the lives of almost a complete human family. Martin is not motivated by a desire to end the instrumentalisation of nature, but by the need to protect his own species. Moreover, although he appears to mourn the thylacine's death, we read the tiger's dead body here as a substitute for Lucy's own body. Martin lovingly enfolds the supine thylacine in a lover's embrace that was never realised with Lucy. This comparison is furthered in that both of these bodies are ultimately burnt.

The notion that *The Hunter* has an environmental agenda is rendered more ambiguous by the framing of Martin's narrative in terms of redemption. Martin, as an individual, goes from being an alienated loner – his employer comments that '[i]t must be very nice for you ... not to need anyone' – to a man capable of attachments. Of these relationships, it is male kinship that is prioritised. Lucy's death allows a side-lining of the romance plot and, implicitly, enables Martin to become a father without the need for a woman to bear his child. The film symbolically represents this when, prior to going to meet Bike in the school playground at the end of the film, Martin puts Jarrah's drink bottle – which he found in the bush – in his back pocket. In the final scene when man and boy hug, Martin is depicted, despite his violence towards the thylacine, as a loving and healed man, endorsing a normalisation of violence towards both the nonhuman and women.

## Conclusion

*The Hunter* and *Dying Breed* define life, whether through reproduction or its discontinuity through extinction, as something that is governed by humans. In both of these texts this is very specifically gendered as the providence of men who come to stand in for the human species more broadly. Women and animals assume the position of the nonhuman in a performatively constructed logic of domination that codes them as subject to the rights of men to govern reproduction and determine species survival. Here men become the masters of women and animals and justify their violence through a logic of stewardship of the nonhuman. These politics, represented in cultural texts, resonate with the material thylacine's history both in terms of the significance of the hunt in their extinction and the confinement of the last thylacine in a zoo. Today zoos are environments where reproduction is fully governed by humans. The conservation agenda of many zoos can be understood in relation to the redemption of the human as a species. It is through these breeding programmes that humans can restore species numbers and 'undo' the extinction engendered by human impact. Ironically, as Chrulow observes, the more endangered an animal, the greater the intensification of the breeding programme and consequently the greater the violence enacted on the animal body. He describes this 'regular testing, extraction of fluids, transportation, enforced tranquilisation, separation and recombination of social groups, imposed breeding and the removal of offspring' as a 'veritable

abduction and rape' (Chrulew).<sup>16</sup> The logic of human domination of animal lives and bodies is even more pronounced in the Australian Museum's ill-fated resurrection project initiated in 1999, which attempted to clone a thylacine using the DNA from a preserved specimen from 1866. Mike Archer, the then Director of the Australian Museum, described this project explicitly as one that could redeem humans for species loss when he suggested that it would 'reverse one of the great blots of the history of the Colonisation of Australia' (qtd in Smith 270). These conservation agendas, however, ultimately remain conservative in their biopolitical framing of life, death, extinction and re-surrection as human powers – something that the failure of the resurrection project might caution against.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Colin Salter, Belinda Smail, and two anonymous reviewers for their thorough readings of drafts of this article and their insightful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article we define Tasmanian cinema as films that are shot (or set) primarily on the island and that depict Tasmanian narratives. The thylacine is referenced in a very few other Australian films including *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976) where, as Helena Forscher observes, Morgan is directly aligned with a wild animal in general and the thylacine specifically (160–62). Thylacines feature as lycanthropes in *Howling III: The Marsupials* (1987). Forscher argues that director Philippe Mora uses the thylacine motif in these two films as an expression of persecution (202).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Chrulew observes that often ‘numerous animals were slaughtered in the collection of a few’. One of the photographs at TMAG is of a thylacine mother and her three cubs at Mary Roberts’ private zoo ‘Beaumaris’ (later the Hobart Zoo). The photograph’s caption notes that two other thylacines died during the capture attempt. The last captive thylacine was caught by Elias Churchill, a timber cutter and snarer working in the Florentine Valley (Paddle 190). Between 1924 and 1933 Churchill managed to capture eight adult tigers. However, of these six were strangled by the snares or so badly maimed that Churchill subsequently killed the animals (Paddle 190–91).

<sup>4</sup> For an extended discussion of this point see Chrulew.

<sup>5</sup> The name and sex of this animal has been the subject of debate. After the thylacine’s death, the animal was apparently delivered to TMAG where it was deemed that the tiger’s skin was in such poor condition that s/he was not worth preserving (Sleightholme 953). Consequently the sex of this last captive thylacine was impossible to determine from remains. For many years the tiger was assumed to be male but using photographs and film footage, Robert Paddle argues she was female (191). Using the same footage, Stephen Sleightholme has more recently highlighted the presence of a scrotal sac (956), thereby determining that the last captive thylacine was male. The name of this particular tiger has also been contested. The ‘last’ thylacine is popularly believed to have been called Benjamin. However as Paddle convincingly argues, the origins of this name are spurious (197–201).



<sup>6</sup> The thylacine's importance in Australian history is emphasised by the fact that September 7, the date of the last captive Tasmanian tiger's death, has become National Threatened Species Day.

<sup>7</sup> Pearce shares with the thylacine a significant place in the Tasmanian imaginary as both historical entity and mythic figure. Like the thylacine, Pearce also features in Tasmanian cinema in films such as Michael James Rowland's *The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce* (2008) and Jonathan auf der Heide's *Van Diemen's Land* (2009).

<sup>8</sup> The fictional town is called Sarah and takes its name from Sarah Island, the remote penal settlement from which Alexander Pearce made his escape with seven other convicts in 1822.

<sup>9</sup> It could be argued that the cannibals' practice of ambushing their victims works with scientific theories, based on the morphology of the thylacine, that s/he ambushed other animals. This is probably drawing rather a long bow however, particularly as the suspense and terror of the ambush is a convention of the horror genre and would therefore be an expected feature of *Dying Breed*.

<sup>10</sup> This discourse is foregrounded in Leigh's novel where M unambiguously aligns his pursuit of women with the hunt for the tiger. He describes himself as 'romancing his prey' (90). There is a well-established feminist engagement with the patriarchal domination of women and raced and classed others and the domination and consumption of the nonhuman. See for example Adams. More recently Jovian Parry has picked up on this, discussing gender performance in relation to the consumption of meat and the domination of nonhuman animals.

<sup>11</sup> This connection is also made on the DVD cover which asserts that Martin is 'unexpectedly drawn to the troubled family and the treacherous landscape'.

<sup>12</sup> For a broad ecological feminist engagement with the correlation of women and nature see Plumwood (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*).

<sup>13</sup> In many ways *Dying Breed* plays to popular and problematic jokes about Tasmania on mainland Australia as a place populated by inbreds.

<sup>14</sup> The removal of the women's teeth is analogous with practices in industrial farming such as the debeaking or beak trimming of battery hens and the clipping of pigs' teeth. In Melanie Light's short film *The Herd* (2014) the links between agribusiness and the patriarchal oppression of women is made explicit through the replacement of cows with women as a dairy herd.

<sup>15</sup> Leigh Dale, writing on the novel, also examines ideas of reproduction in this text. Where we differ from Dale is that we see this as a film about non-reproductive futures through species extinction. We posit that cloning practices are about production not reproduction.

<sup>16</sup> This is also a key feature of modern industrial animal agriculture.

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