

Ned Kelly Without a Beard

Unmasking and Truth-Telling in Justin Kurzel's *True History of the Kelly Gang*

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Abstract: Before Justin Kurzel's 2019 adaptation of Peter Carey's 2001 Booker Prize-winning True History of the Kelly Gang came out, almost a dozen films had already been made about the outlaw Ned Kelly. Raising money for a new film seemed like an impossible task. What untold aspects are there of this story? Kurzel, like Carey, was not interested in telling how it really was. Rather he became interested in how history can be "stolen" and turned into political agenda. The oft-told story of the Kelly Gang continues to define the way Australians think about themselves and their national identity. Kurzel's disturbing take on Carey's book is not likely to turn out to be a crowd-pleasing, popular film. This paper aims to examine how the film deliberately breaks with the received notions of Kelly representations. A beardless Ned Kelly succeeds in alienating rather than identifying the viewer with the main character, thus highlighting the artificial character of the Ned Kelly myth.

Depending on how you count it, Justin Kurzel's 2019 adaptation of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) is either the 10th (Gaunson, "True History"), the 11th (Groves), or the 16th film (Quill and Phillips) made on the theme of the bush-ranger, Ned Kelly. The long row of films opened with the 1906 film, *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, Australia's first feature film. "Whether or not *The Story of the Kelly Gang* is the world's first narrative feature film is still debated," claims film critic Paul Byrnes, but we can certainly blame this film for "kick-starting" "the trend for bush-ranging films, many of which were made in the next seven years, until 1912, when

the police succeeded in getting a ban on bushranging films in the states of Victoria and New South Wales” (Byrnes).

The ban, however, did not affect the popularity of the genre. Lacking in formidable heroes or founding fathers, Irish-Australians especially viewed Ned Kelly as a figure who could personify the struggles and tribulations of a young nation in a strange land. In a podcast interview with Ramona Koval about *True History of the Kelly Gang* in November 2021, Carey insisted that it is impossible to describe Ned Kelly to Americans as someone like Jesse James or Billy the Kid. He explained that, in fact, the cultural significance of Ned Kelly or the space he occupies in Australian consciousness can only be understood by comparing him to Thomas Jefferson or George Washington (Koval). Whilst there is no denial of the crimes that Kelly committed, the symbolic space he occupies in Australian cultural history elevates him to a level higher than an ordinary bushranger, hence the comparison with the founding fathers. Pitting his struggle against the representatives of rich English landowners, Kelly quickly became a symbol of resistance to unjust and unfair colonial power, a symbol that could be endowed with characteristics that, in fact, were larger than the character itself.

There is no end to the various literary and visual representations of the Kelly story. It is the story that captivates Australian imagination perhaps more than anything else. In 2013, Stephen Gaunson published a book called *The Ned Kelly Films: A Cultural History of Kelly History*. In the book, he discusses nine feature films, three miniseries, and two TV films made until the date of publication, but he excludes the documentaries and short films. Kurzel’s film is, thus, the 10th and latest addition to this list. No wonder that after the announcement of the first billed cast of *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the internet went into overdrive with reactions. Don Groves asked the question: “How many Ned Kelly movies are too many?”. He surveyed industry players’ reactions to the upcoming film ranging from “[p]lease not another one” (Sandra Alexander of Sandstar Films) to QED Productions’ Roger Dunn’s expectations: “If you’ve actually read Peter Carey’s great book of the same title, you’ll see how an adaptation of its angle on the Kelly saga will be like no other” (Groves). Indeed, Dunn is proved right. Kurzel’s film might be the 10th feature film, but it is like no other. In this article, I take a look at the reception of both the book and the 2019 adaptation by Justin Kurzel, highlight some of the controversies, and finally outline the methods employed to transmute Carey’s postmodern text into visual language.

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Admittedly, adapting a Peter Carey text is no easy task. Theodore F. Sheckels argues that as film is primarily a visual and secondarily an auditory genre, the post-modern avoidance of the specificity of time and place becomes very hard to convey. In addition, cinema audiences' expectation of genre and heroism also presents a problem (Sheckels, "Difficulties" 85–86). In two of his articles (in 1999 and 2005), Sheckels discusses specifically where the adaptations of Peter Carey's texts go wrong. He argues very convincingly that filmmakers are unable to "translate" the postmodern and satirical aspects of Carey's work. One of Sheckel's examples is Carey's short story, "Crabs," at the end of which the main character, obsessed with cars, turns into a car himself and (unsuccessfully) attempts to leave the confinements of his environment, the metaphor of which is the title of the adaptation, *Dead-end Drive-in*. In the film version, instead of the metamorphosis, Crabs literally speeds away like in a "classic 'escape' movie" (Sheckels, "Difficulties" 88). Sheckels argues that, whilst postmodern film is possible, the film adaptations under examination seem to "pull the work away from the postmodern aesthetic" and offer something "more modern, or realistic, thereby confusing or altering Carey's themes" (Sheckels, "The Difficulties" 83).

In what way is Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* a postmodern text? First and foremost, through its re-working of history. By taking a historical figure who for various reasons is deeply entrenched in Australian national consciousness and attributing new and unusual characteristics to him. Australian readers are by and large familiar with the deeds of the Kelly Gang. These signpost events, like the Fitzpatrick incident or the shooting of Aaron Sheritt, are left the same in the novel. What is different is the "small print" of Kelly's life. It is his everyday life, the days spent with his family, friends and the authorities that are filled with new content, for example the discovery of his father in a dress, or a relationship with a prostitute, delivered in a radically new way. This new narrative that Carey invents both confirms and re-imagines the world of the hero and/or villain in focus.

In several interviews, Peter Carey talks about his inspirations to write a book about the Irish-Australian social bandit, Ned Kelly. Carey especially emphasises the impact that the reading of the so-called *Jerilderie letter* had on him. This is an 8000-word text of over 50 small handwritten pages that Ned Kelly composed in response to what he perceived as unfavourable media coverage, wishing to articulate his own point of view publicly (O'Reilly, "Mythology" 74). Thus, in this case, the "letter" is understood as public discourse; it was always meant for publication. However, Kelly's attempt to get the letter published was denied. The manifesto was

not printed in his lifetime and the text only surfaced many years after his death. Today, it is on display in the State Library of Victoria. Peter Carey vividly recalls his first encounter with this text, the “voice,” as he terms it (Carey, “Imagining”). He typed it all up for himself and made long-term plans to return the authority to this speaking voice, “the character’s DNA” (Carey, “Imagining”), which was denied an audience in his life by writing a novel which used the *Jerilderie letter* as a source, both for content and style.

Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly series provided another source of inspiration for Carey. He recalls seeing Nolan’s paintings at an exhibition (probably in 1962), the second major exhibition he ever attended (Carey, “Imagining”). Nolan’s depiction of the two-dimensional Kelly, who is represented metaphorically by his famous armour, “blew Carey’s socks off” (Carey, “Imagining”). In the 1946 painting entitled *Ned Kelly*, the outlaw is positioned in a way that the viewer is behind the figure, seeing through the armour and taking on whatever antagonists there are on the horizon. Another painting depicting Steve Hart in a dress refers to the known disguise the gang member adopted when wishing to avoid discovery. In his book, Carey uses this incident to create a private mythology of frocked fighters of an imaginary Irish rebellion and resistance to English colonial power.

In the novel, Carey’s version of Ned Kelly writes his history to his daughter. Whilst many things are unclear about Ned Kelly’s life, it seems fairly certain that he never had a daughter. By creating a fictional daughter (and not a son), and thus “confusing fiction and fact” (Kurzelt 1:30), Carey made certain assumptions about his audience:

And I always thought that if you call a book “True History,” each word calls the other into question, and for a literary audience everyone is going to know what the game is, but for a less literary audience I also thought that having a daughter—well, there is no daughter in the story, so I thought that stabilised the “True” part of it. (O’Reilly, “The voice” 164)

The game is, of course, a postmodern understanding of history—hence the title, *True History of the Kelly Gang*. “Anyone who says ‘true history’ is obviously writing a novel... No historian would ever say that” (Carey qtd. in Eggert 123). And for this reason, Carey refused to insert a definite article before the adjective “true” in the title.

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Kurzel's film opens with a clever addition to this polemic of the title. First, he displays the disclaimer: "[n]othing you're about to see is true." Then he keeps the sole word "true" lingering on the screen for a few moments just to be followed up with the rest of the words of the title: *True History of the Kelly Gang*. It is a fair warning, and again, a clear display of the rules of the "game," as Carey said above.

But this was not the last trick that was played on the reader. The book itself is organised around "parcels" and not chapters, and each "parcel" bears a description by an archivist (or historian). If this was not enough, in 2001, The University of Queensland Press published a softcover edition of the novel which resembled a manuscript, featuring uneven pages as though cut up by a knife. Carey invites the reader to play an elaborate literary game with him. However, deliberately or otherwise, not all readers picked up on the hints. Ignoring the obvious signpost of implanting a fake daughter, some readers felt cheated by Carey's postmodern handling of historical facts. "It felt so genuine" a reader called Louis Kaufman complained. "With the descriptions of the letters and the bindings of his work ... really made it seem real to me." "I hadn't understood that this was a work of fiction" (Kaufman).

Kaufman's comment speaks of his reluctance to play the author's game and expresses his disappointment and annoyance at the gap between readerly expectation of the hunt for historical "truth" and the writer's refusal to provide this. He understands correctly the book's attempt to give a voice to Ned Kelly and "compensate" him for the publicity denied in his lifetime, but he does not buy Carey's postmodern articulation of the inner "truth" of the character.

Kaufman was not the only reader to refuse the postmodern understanding of history in the book. Kelly historian, Doug Morrissey, wrote a damning review of Carey's book and Kurzel's film adaptation in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled "Another hogwash film peddles fake history of the Kelly gang."

Kurzel's movie is neither true nor history. Carey said of his acclaimed book "it's the most invented, made-up book I've ever written." He should have called it "An Imaginary History of the Kelly Gang"... The literary rubric of Carey's book and Kurzel's movie is don't let the truth or anything resembling the truth get in the way of eccentric storytelling. (Morrissey, "Another")

Morrissey went on to slam the film and its “sham muddle of truth and fiction” and “plethora of falsehoods” in a longer article in the monthly *Quadrant* entitled “The Silliest Ned Kelly Movie Yet.” Despite acknowledging the film’s grounding in Carey’s re-imagining the Kelly story, the review is deeply offended by both the book’s and the film’s disregard for historical facts. It is clear that, in this “double adaptation” of Kelly’s story, first, the distillation of the “voice” of Kelly by Carey from the *Jerilderie letter* and, then, by Kurzel’s adaptation of Carey’s adaptation, the “fidelity” demand of adaptations is replaced by a demand for historical accuracy—the “wagon wheels” that Kurzel talks about in this interview with *Deadline* magazine:

I think that sometimes we get caught up in historical accuracy being the truth, when it sort of ignores the truth at times. I don’t really care what the wagon wheel looks like. What I really care about is the inherent truth of the character, and how those times could have felt. When we made that decision, it was really liberating, and a lot of that was inspired by the spirit of the book. (Utichi)

But how successful is Kurzel’s pursuit of the visualisation of the “spirit of the book” (Utichi)? How can a “voice” be adapted? Is the “voice” the “spirit”?

“A faithful adaptation is a boring idea to me,” says Carey. “If you are going to make a book into a film, you really have to break it. So, what I will say about this film is that they broke it—and I gave them permission and continue to give them permission to do so. Their politics are different to my politics. Theirs is about toxic masculinity perhaps, and a boy driven mad. Mine is about the convict stain and the convict seed who becomes the hero of the country. They are different things. Some of the things that they have done with the book are really thrilling and I like the degree to which it is reckless and transgressive. But it is not my book. And that’s all right.” (White)

Favourable reviews generally highlight the cinematography, the costumes, and the musical score as the cornerstones of the adaptation, as for example, Debbie Elias, Ella Taylor, or Fiona Underhill point out in their reviews. “The soundtrack,

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by turns eerie and jangling, draws on the frantically nihilist canon of the 1970s,” Ella Taylor writes. The punk association is not missed by many other critics either: “Ned is a damaged and unhinged violent, colonial, punk anarchist with an anti-authoritarian ethos, ready to unleash his wrath against those who cross his path or bring threat to his family, especially his mother Ellen” (Gaunson, “True”). George MacKay, who plays Ned Kelly in the film, recalls the following guidelines by Kurzel: “We are going to let go of history. We are going to use what is needed, but we are going to make it in the spirit of these men. ... I’ve always seen these guys as a punk band, they are a bunch of angry, ambitious, confused young men” (Allen). In fact, in preparation for the film, MacKay was asked to form his own punk band with the rest of his on-screen mates and perform in a bar after only three weeks of rehearsing. The “gang” completed the assignment, came up with their own songs, two of which ended up in the film (Allen). Other cast members such as Russell Crowe, who plays the bushranger Harry Power, and Marlon Williams, playing George King, also sing a song they wrote for Kurzel’s film. Fleshlight, the “pop-up” punk band (Melissa Fyfe’s term) has quite a following on the internet. “Watching this film, it may be safe to say that Ned Kelly would have fit quite nicely in the punk world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (Elias).

The aim of the punk band exercise was to make the cast understand the mood imagined for the film. Earl Cave, who played Dan Kelly, refers to his experience as “feral” in an interview given to *HeyUGuys*. Kurzel assigned compulsory film viewing and music listening tasks as well for the main character. The atmosphere was distilled from the aggression expressed in classic Australian films like *The Chopper*, *Romper Stomper* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Allen). Mackay, who was chosen for the role despite not having a beard like the real Ned Kelly, was expected to bring to life the raw physicality of Kelly’s relationships and not the myth that he was beginning to become even in his life. “Without Ned’s signature bushy beard, his youth (the real Kelly died aged 25) is emphasised and MacKay conveys the boy-desperate-to-be-a-man so well, expertly navigating a range of performative confidence and aggression while constantly being plagued by inner doubts and regrets” (Underhill, “True”). The actor’s “transformation” into Ned Kelly was not done by way of make-up or hairdressing. In Kurzel’s film, dress understood as a cultural tool takes central importance. In this context, Ned’s beard is just another mask, just like dress in the film is understood “as war mask essentially” (Fyfe).

In keeping with the anachronistic treatment of history, the costumes used in the film were not trying to signpost the nineteenth century either. On the contrary, the 1980s 'I love Western' jumper, probably from Colorado (Hutton), worn by Joe Byrne, strengthens the idea of the parallel drawn with the modern age. Alice Babidge, costume designer, claimed that she “didn’t care where [the clothes] were from in terms of period, location, being feminine or masculine” (Hutton). She describes working with Kurzel like “walking out into the abyss,” “creating the rules of the world that we wanted to inhabit—and then deciding whether we break those rules. ... It was more about evoking the right sensibility” (Hutton).

The dresses, worn by the gang members to scare “the f***ing bejesus out of the English” (Kurzel, 1:16:22), were worked into Carey’s text to signify the gang’s desire to connect with Irish resistance movements (Smyth). Whilst there were sightings of gang members in frocks (especially Steve Hart) that are documented and can be regarded as factual (Fyfe), the *Son’s of Sieve* resistance movement is Peter Carey’s ingenious invention. “Carey’s cross-dressing theme was ‘a huge part of what made me fall in love with the book’ ... The characters in the film are continually wrestling with what it is to be an Australian male” (Kurzel qtd. in Fyfe). The dresses helped Kurzel invert the traditional concept of an “alpha” (Fyfe) male. Whilst he made men wear dresses in the film, Ellen Kelly is shown wearing pants. In this context, Kelly’s legendary armour is also part of this “dress-up” theme: the jeans-clad Kelly recruits have iron headpieces with drawings on them. The armour here is decorated with graffiti, reflecting the textual irony that is the prevailing mode of storytelling in Carey’s novel. In some cases, a beard is painted on. It literally becomes part of the masquerade in a carnivalesque representation that can be put on or removed at will. This way the beard, which is an entrenched part of the Kelly mythology, has been physically removed from the person wearing it and is made part of the role-play, dress-up. Kurzel also gave an eye patch to Steve Hart, played by first-time actor Louis Hewison, which further enhances the carnivalesque vibe. The conscious choice of representing Kelly without his usual beard signifies an “unmasking,” the attempt to divorce the man from the legend that he has turned into. This is the invention of the film, part of the adaptation, as Carey’s text makes a number of references to Kelly having a beard: e.g. “I had grown the brave beginning of a beard” (Carey, *True* 164) or “I had a mighty beard and was a child no more” (Carey, *True* 169).

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Cross-dressing is taken to a new level in the third part of the film, entitled “Monitor,” documenting Kelly’s obsession with the perceived indestructible armoured protection of American warships. “I am the monitor,” he declares a number of times as he no longer sees himself as a vulnerable human being. The metaphorical (and physical) transformation of man into (killing) machine is complete. In the film, this is represented by the overdominance of metal. Kurzel houses the famous Glenrowan siege in a barren metallic shed, in the company of “hooded and kneeling captives deliberately invok[ing] an ISIS hostage video” (Sparrow). This association certainly does not contribute to the romanticisation of the Kelly saga at all; on the contrary, it evokes brutality. In fact, the viewer is reminded of an earlier scene which shows Ned cutting off the ear of a dead policeman.

The representation of the siege itself breaks with the realism that characterises the rest of the film. Fyfe suggests that this may be the result of the lack of budget for a “proper” police siege. Forced to find a creative solution, Kurzel decided to use an army of white stylised policemen descending upon the gang. Covered in excessive amounts of blood and gore, the gang’s undoing is represented through throbbing, disturbing stroboscopic images that are conveyed through the increasingly limited point of view of the main character.

Kelly is shown to gradually unravel and “lose the plot” in the stroboscopic light. Yet, he cannot afford to lose control altogether. His empowerment comes directly from his writing. “Are we gonna re-write our own history?” (Kurzel 1:28:27), he asks his recruits in a motivational speech earlier. “Every man should be an author of his own history” (Kurzel 1:22:24). He now knows that history is narration itself. As well as narrating Kelly’s autobiography, the film also uses multiple shots of Ned writing “his truth” to ask questions about mythologising, calling other representations into question. Which word is more reliable than the other? Thomas Curnow, the traitor, or hero from another point of view, who stops a trainload of policemen from meeting their certain death at the hand of the Kelly Gang, gives Ned “his word” that he will return if allowed to fetch some books on English parsing to help Ned perfect his narrative. He does not keep his word. Curnow’s word is literally worth nothing.

Kurzel has another take on the schoolteacher and the final “word.” At the end of the film, Curnow tells a packed hall his eyewitness account of Kelly’s last words. Whilst we see a parallel story of Ellen Kelly warning Ned not to say anything on the gallows, Curnow tells the audience the famous last words since entrenched in popular mythology: “such is life.” Kurzel refuses to confirm or strengthen this

legend. In an important difference from the ending of the 2003 Gregor Jordan *Ned Kelly* film, which cuts off before the hanging and ends with an image of Ned still being alive, Kurzel's final shot is a dead, silent figure, dangling from the end of the rope. We hear the voice of George MacKay reading the end of Kelly's autobiography advising his daughter to "write [her] own history" (1:59:11). Kelly is dead, but his voice, his version of the truth is preserved in his writings. There will always be competing stories, exemplified by Curnow's lies, but these need to be handled with a postmodern understanding of history: "[w]hatever they write about me, whatever names I am given or whatever falsehoods are attributed to me, know that much is true" (Kurzel 1:59).

Taking the above into consideration, it may be safe to conclude that Justin Kurzel's adaptation of Peter Carey's complex postmodern book accomplished the task successfully. The film magnified the use of crossdressing in Carey's text and created a visual context which unsettled the normative masculinity usually associated with Ned Kelly. This resistance to established discourses is symbolised by the lack of Kelly's beard in the film. In addition, Kurzel created a whole punk-rock metallic aesthetics for his film, complete with music from the 1970s, and tried to convey the feeling of the gang's subculture by relating it to the transgressions of punks. This aesthetics is the dominant mode of the depiction of violence, the murders, and the siege in which Kelly "turns into" an ironclad monitor represented by his armour and the metallic shed in which the gang is trapped. The film is deliberately provocative. The representation of gender roles and sexuality is fluid and pluralist. Whilst Carey wanted to give Kelly a voice he was denied, Kurzel unmasked the trappings of masculinity: the beard, historical dress, and compulsory heterosexuality, therefore, liberated Kelly from the straitjacket of mythology that he was forced into. Kurzel gave Kelly the last word and whilst his history may have been hijacked and distorted, he should also have, and should have always had a right to contest the stories and mythologies created about him. Many reviews and articles recognised the relevance of such a postmodern treatment of history in the film and responded well to it. However, the truth of the Kelly gang and Australian history itself is likely to remain a contentious battlefield for a long time to come.

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Cecilia Gall graduated from Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in 1990. She, then, spent three years in Australia, attending Australian Studies courses at the University of Queensland. After holding various non-academic jobs and teaching at ELTE on a voluntary basis, she was employed full-time in 2001 as lecturer in Australian Studies, Department of Language Pedagogy. In the past 20 years she has taught courses on Australian and New Zealand literature, film, history, and politics. Her research area is post-revival Australian cinema.