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Dark Laughs

Australian Comedy Noir from the Outback to Tassie

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Introduction: From Classic Noir Parody to Aussie Comedy Noir

However you choose to identify noir – as a genre, style, or cycle – over its 80 years from classic American film noir to neo-noir, neon-noir, national noirs, and television noir, it has undeniably seeped into popular culture. Exemplary of this is the way noir has hybridised with other genres and styles, true of comedy as much as its more serious pairings with science fiction, Western, and Gothic. This is not a new phenomenon: Sue Short points out that pastiche noir began appearing at the end of the classic cycle,

citing *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) as an example that noir has always had “a sense of exaggeration and self-consciousness” (185). Successful parody relies on a shared understanding of visual motifs, narratives, characters, and iconography. As Dahlia Schweitzer indicates, “we take the rules of genres so seriously that we even call attention to them for the sake of comedy ... even when poking fun, the rules are still being followed” (117-118). With so many easily identifiable features, noir has enjoyed homage and parody in sketch comedy, films, animation, and the ‘noir episode’ in television over the years. There are also comedy-noir hybrids that don’t solely rely on parody but rather weave the style into the fabric of their narratives and visuals.

Comedy-noir draws not only on classic film noir and neo-noir, but encompasses other noir iterations, such as Scandi Noir, its international adaptations, and the rise of distinctive national noirs, including the growing catalogue of Australian Noir. Audience understanding of the generic ‘rules’ of these ‘new noirs’ has also allowed for comedic parodies and hybridisations to emerge. Australian audiences are no strangers to comedy-infused crime, and Greg Dolgoplov’s work includes a great discussion of its distinct flavour in Australian features as well as defining the features of Outback Noir. Series such as *Mr Inbetween* (2018-2021), which Cath Moore notes was “billed as a black comedy crime drama” (127), have also been recognised as part of the growing Australian Noir oeuvre, with critic Andrew Nette describing the hitman drama as “so dark, so funny and so noir [and] also ... so very Australian”. The SBS series *Troppo* (2022), based on the successful novels of Candice Fox (marketed under the publisher’s ‘Penguin Noir’ banner), also fits the Australian Noir mould. Its comic moments arise from the relationship between its two leads, a jaded American cop and a damaged local loner with a passion for sleuthing, employing the common crime trope of mismatched detectives. While these two shows are solid examples of how comic overtones inevitably bleed into Australian Noir, I would be hesitant to bill them as ‘comedy-noir’. There are others that fit this description more closely, combining noir conventions with comedy (and a touch of the Australian Gothic) for a more baked-in approach that pays homage to or takes inspiration from noir, as well as drawing on Australian comic-crime traditions. I’d like to explore this concept in a small selection of recent TV series: *Thou Shalt Not Steal* (2024), *Deadloch* (2023), and *Bay of Fires* (2023).

Outback Comedy Noir: *Thou Shalt Not Steal*

I believe Stan’s recent series *Thou Shalt Not Steal* (2024) is our first Outback Noir comedy, parodying identifiable aspects of Outback Noir, which itself shares generic lineage with the Western. Ivan Sen’s *Mystery Road* (2013) and its subsequent sequels and TV series “flipped the colour palette” of noir (Turnbull) to Outback red, and inverted the traditional noir iconography of shadowed night into bright day (Dolgoplov 80). That the visual language of *Mystery Road* is repeated in *Thou Shalt* is no accident: writer-director Dylan River also co-wrote and directed the prequel series *Mystery Road: Origin*. The *Mystery Road* film was shot in Queensland and its various series in Western Australia, showcasing iconic Outback Noir landscapes, with long stretches of red-dusted roads flanked by dry scrub. *Thou Shalt* is set and shot in South Australia and the Northern Territory, so immediately places the viewer in this familiar setting.

To signify its comic turn, *Thou Shalt* amplifies the revisionist Western iconography of Outback Noir in the *Mystery Road* universe (Dolgoplov 79), with outward parody of classic Westerns, including in its music and titles design. When Robyn (Sherry-Lee Watson) escapes juvenile incarceration in the first episode, she jumps on a correctional officer's back as if riding a bucking bronco. After initiating her escape on foot, Robyn busts her ailing grandfather (Warren H. Williams) from hospital then proceeds to steal a taxi. After he reveals her father is still alive, she drives them to where her mother lives to find answers, eventually setting off to find him and evade recapture. The determination of cabbie Maxine (Miranda Otto) to retrieve her car, and the sizable bag of cash in its boot, sets an adventurous interstate pursuit in motion. She convinces outback preacher Robert (Noah Taylor) to drive her in his rattling station wagon and caravan, as his son Gidge (Will McDonald) has also absconded with Robyn.

Thou Shalt first flips the Outback Noir genre by making the young Indigenous girl the protagonist rather than the victim. Thematically, "past and present are inextricably linked" in Outback Noir, as they are in other forms of noir (Dolgoplov 84), and the young Robyn's journey is similarly concerned with reconciling elements of her past with her present. Just as *Mystery Road's* Indigenous detective Jay Swan (Aaron Pederson) "negotiates a complex world between black and white" (Dolgoplov 82), Robyn is similarly caught between two worlds: in one, her estranged alcoholic black mother, in the other, the absent white father she's trying to find. Like classic noir detectives, Robyn is also given a narrational voiceover, but in her case, her expletive-laden inner voice adds to the comic effect while also establishing the series' socio-cultural context: "I'm 17 and I'm a thief. Them missionaries reckon 'thou shalt not steal'. A bit rich from the bible bashing bastards that stole our country" (ep. 1).

As Short identifies in features such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Fargo* (1996), "accidental or inept criminality" and "comic mischance" (201; 202) can be used to subvert noir-style crime and violence. *Thou Shalt* employs such shockingly hilarious moments: Maxine is electrocuted by the caravan's dodgy wiring, and a trucker accidentally shoots himself in the head. Dolgoplov notes that dumb criminals often feature in Australian crime comedies (84), and to them *Thou Shalt* adds even dumber cops. Robyn easily fools a local uniformed cop to avoid arrest, and a mismatched duo of federal police officers, cheekily monikered Burke and Wills (Darren Gilshenen and Shari Sebbens), often seem as lost as their namesakes. The white male of the pair parodies male cop machismo, much to the eye-rolling chagrin of his Indigenous female partner.

Although many scenes are played for laughs, the comedy does not detract from Robyn's serious situation. She is certainly no angel and knows it, but the plucky teen refuses to remain a victim and fights back even in the face of hopelessness. Likewise, serious issues encountered by the Indigenous characters – racism, alcoholism, incarceration – are woven into the plot, but the characters are also allowed to have some fun, for example the Aboriginal men making fun (in their language) of Will's clothing, and the cheeky aunties who make sexual comments about a young police officer. Creator Dylan River deliberately set out to educate with humour, saying "with comedy, hopefully people will watch this who usually wouldn't watch an Aboriginal, Indigenous drama" (qtd. in Frater).

Dark secrets and moral decay lurking beneath the surface in small communities is a common rural noir (and indeed, Australian Noir) trope that also appears in *Thou Shalt*. Preacher Robert has lied to his son Gidge about the boy's parentage, is profiteering from selling alcohol to the local Aboriginal community, and, despite his self-proclaimed piety, is easily swayed by Maxine's sexual advances, which barely conceal her own dark motives. Robyn and Gidge are betrayed by the morally corrupt adults they encounter, such as the road stop truckers who menace the teens with the threat of sexual assault, one of whom is likely a serial killer and kidnaps Gidge. Although Maxine initially purports to help Robyn, she later tries to force the girl into prostitution as payback for her theft. Robyn's reunion with her dumb ocker father also proves a fizzer, with his wife summoning Burke and Wills to arrest them both. Ultimately, it's up to Gidge and Robyn to save each other.

Just as Outback Noir provides a glimmer of reconciliatory hope, shown through *Mystery Road's* black and white detectives working together (Dolgoplov 84), Robyn's unlikely allyship with Gidge blossoms into a sweet romance, making their story akin to the lovers-on-the-run noir trope. While the series' ending sees Robyn back in juvenile detention, she and Gidge dance joyfully together from opposite sides of the chain-link fence, the smile never leaving her face even as she is dragged away by the guards. This scene comically embodies Alberto Garcia's concept of 'bright noir', in which noir's traditional narrative of futility is undermined by instead "embrac[ing] optimism" (42). Robyn's voiceover intones, "I'm gonna take a new road. With this fella" (ep. 8), and audiences are left hopeful the couple will find a way (if not necessarily legal) to be together.

Tassie Goth-Noir-Comedy: *Deadloch*

Amazon's *Deadloch* bills itself as "a feminist noir comedy set against a bucolic backdrop with a rising body count" (Guesswork TV), not only placing its homage to noir front and centre, but teasing an intriguing twist on generic conventions. When watching the series, it becomes clear that the 'noir' in its tagline refers to more recent television noir, and in particular Scandinavian (or Nordic) Noir, rather than the classic era. Crime scholar Sue Turnbull says the series "flips the Nordic Noir crime genre on its arse", and the *Hollywood Reporter* states this Tasmanian Noir is an "irreverent send up of self-serious Nordic-noir/Scandi-noir shows like *The Killing* and *The Bridge* and their international imitators like the U.K.'s *Broadchurch*" (Rahman). In fact, creators Kate McCartney and Kate McLennan used the working title *Funny Broadchurch* while developing the show (Press).

Like any parody, *Deadloch's* success as a comedy-noir lies in the audience's understanding of the original style. I would also argue that a further precedent to this understanding can be found in the dramatic Tassie Goth-Noir series *The Kettering Incident* (2016) and *The Gloaming* (2020), themselves self-consciously influenced by Scandi Noir (Brammer 125). *Deadloch* also makes use of its Tasmanian setting to visually reference Scandi (and Tassie) Noir. Just as the opening title sequences of *The Gloaming* and *The Kettering Incident* showcase Tasmania's dangerous beauty and hint at their dark themes (Brammer 132), *Deadloch's* opener consists of "a drone shot across an expanse of grey water under a leaden sky accompanied by eerie music and a sense of foreboding" (Turnbull), coding it as a noir-mystery without foregrounding its comic stylings. In a television interview, McLennan

states, “we keep calling it Tassie Noir, I mean we're not the first person to say that, but it is”, emphasising that the creative team imagined what a northern hemisphere crime drama would look like in Australia, and in particular in Tasmania, where “it feels like that no matter where you are in Tasmania that you're in a small town” (qtd. in *The Project*).

Deadloch's first scene encapsulates McLennan's and McCartney's key aims of interrogating the tropes of television crime noir. It delightfully flips the naked, violated female corpse trope of endless crime dramas, by having two Indigenous teen girls discover the corpse of a white man on the shores of its titular lake. Miranda (Kartanya Maynard) and Tammy (Leonie Whyman) are sneaking a smoke on the beach in the early morning gloom, and as *Vanity Fair*'s reviewer observes, “if this were your standard thriller, they'd be the killer's prey” (Press). When they encounter the body, the victim's penis is foregrounded and centred in the frame – a shock for viewers and the characters alike – and then Tammy drops her smoke on the corpse, prompting her to beat the embers on the unfortunate man's pubic hair with a cry of “shit, his dick's on fire!” (ep. 1). McCartney says this choice of victim is a direct result of the creators being “sick of seeing cold white tits on a slab ... with fully dressed men having a conversation over the top of them” (qtd. in *Standard Issue*). The black humour in this inversion of a typical TV noir scene is “inviting us to laugh at the expense of the unfortunate” (Short 183), and as a self-proclaimed feminist comedy the ‘unfortunate’ here is the man. Like *Thou Shalt's* Robyn, Miranda and Tammy also reverse the Outback Noir roles of Indigenous women, a deliberate creative choice to “give a voice to people that would normally be portrayed as victims in these shows” (McLennan qtd. in *Standard Issue*).

Deadloch includes the familiar trope of a pair of investigators forcibly buddied up to investigate a case, trading the “mismatched male and female cop from different cultural backgrounds” (Turnbull) for two women. Local detective Dulcie (Kate Box) is level-headed and meticulous, but rather than parodying the troubled female detective of Scandi noir, she aligns her more closely with the noir male cop with a troubled home life (Turnbull). The shadow of an affair she had when she and wife Cath (Alicia Gardner) lived in Sydney looms over their marriage. Her chalk-and-cheese partner Eddie (Madelaine Sami) is brought in from Darwin to help solve the crime, and this forced partnership cleverly drives both comic and more serious narratives in the show.

Just as Steven Sanders noted that classic hybrid-noir series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1) contained “convoluted plot and subplots, grotesque minor characters, and a protagonist, ... with a troubled past” (453), we observe all these aspects in *Deadloch*. Eddie's past – the death of her former work partner – churns a hidden darkness within her. In another inversion of Scandi Noir, her darkness doesn't manifest in the quiet moodiness of a Sarah Lund (*The Killing*) or the idiosyncrasies of a Saga Noren (*The Bridge*). Instead, Eddie is loud, rambunctious, and often inappropriately shooting her mouth off, manifesting a grotesque *major* character. For much of the series, Eddie's vocal and physical characterisation serves as “the grotesque, unruly female ... celebrated and utilised for comic effect” (Boyle 83). Actress Sami's skills as a physical comedian embody the comic grotesque, and Eddie is constantly moving where Dulcie is more still and observant. Eddie's hilariously profane one-liners are countered by Dulcie's calm and deadpan delivery of her comedic lines. Like the famous female Scandi detectives mentioned above, Dulcie and

Eddie each have a distinctive look. Eddie stubbornly wears the incongruous outfit of shorts, singlet and tropical print shirt with sandals until the Tasmanian cold gets the better of her, when she adopts a new signature look of colourfully mismatched camping shop fleeces and cargo pants, all of which contrast the professionally-clad and well-groomed Dulcie.

The actors skilfully navigate the comic-to-serious turn in the narrative, evidenced when Dulcie chases the drunken Eddie on the slippery deck of a boat (ep. 3), showcasing the physical comedy chops of both actors. Dulcie uncharacteristically raises her voice to Eddie and then savagely mimics her. This temporary swapping of their comic performance styles also marks the turning point in their working relationship, with the scene's seamless switch to more serious tone as Eddie reveals her past trauma. While there are plenty of other laughs to be had in the town's quirky inhabitants, it is the comedic interplay of the two leads which ultimately drives *Deadloch* as comedy and noir-crime procedural. Their relationship can be read both as a sophisticated feminine rendering of the 'straight man/wiseguy' trope of classic comic team-ups and a deliberate twist on the pairing of noir detectives.

Aussie Noir in Tassie: *Bay of Fires*

ABC's Tasmanian-set series is the most slippery of the three to slot into the comedy-noir mould. It undoubtedly takes on aspects of the classic noir gangster/organised crime element, the 'small town crime' tropes of much of Australian Noir, and as 'Tassie Noir' it leverages the landscape and rural quirkiness. However, the comedy component doesn't always hit the mark, and certainly isn't as consistently present on screen as in *Deadloch* and *Thou Shalt*. In *Bay of Fires*, successful Melbourne CEO Anika (Marta Dusseldorp) has the rug pulled from under her when she is targeted by hitmen. All she knows is she has been betrayed by partner (in business and love) Johann (Nikolai Nikolaeff), and must flee to Tasmania with her children into witness protection. Renaming herself Stella, she tries her best to survive both the weirdness and danger in the fictional town of Mystery Bay.

Producer and star Dusseldorp states that the backdrop for *Bay of Fires*, Tasmania's west coast, "is really a character in this show, it's a wild wild west" (*ABC Radio National*). Locations around Zeehan, Queenstown, and Strahan become Mystery Bay, a remote 'wild west' enclave harbouring criminals and informants. This area has previously been referred to as the 'wild west' in deference to the mining activities of the late nineteenth century which formed the unique moon-like appearance Mount Lyell (Bullock 89), and in *Bay of Fires* this poisoned landscape is reflective of its poisonous characters. Its opening title sequence follows the style of its comic and serious Tassie-Noir counterparts, with aerial shots over mist-covered mountains segueing to a dark green underwater shot, highlighting the gothic dread of the landscape. It is of course also extremely beautiful, and the picturesque is deliberately juxtaposed with the violent and strange.

Mystery Bay sports a raft of eccentric small-town inhabitants, such as the pig-owning couple with a snobby eye for fashion, Magda and Heather (Pamela Rabe and Roz Hammond), a UFO-obsessed mechanic (Bob Franklin), and a shadowy cult-like family residing on the edge of town. This places viewers in the familiar, comfortable territories of Australian Noir and crime comedy with

actors they recognise and love. As critic Mel Campbell notes, these “veteran actors ... are having a tremendous amount of fun here as Colourful Locals from Central Casting”. Joining them is hapless local cop Jason (Andre DeVanny), who is clearly powerless against the town’s criminal element. His character is a benign comic example of the struggle figures of authority face in the “moral rottenness of small towns” in *Outback Noir* (Dolgoplov 80).

The classic noir theme of organised crime is realised in the town’s microcosmic criminal underworld, led by ‘queenpin’ Frankie (Kerry Fox). Sanders notes that “violence is an inherent function of the mobster ethos” in television gangster noir such as *The Sopranos* (453), and Frankie doesn’t shy away from doling out violent retribution. This is evidenced in the dispatch of real estate agent Francis (Stephen Curry), who is chased through the dark woods, put on ‘trial’ by the townsfolk and later found dead in a stream by Stella and her kids, his face covered in a plastic bag (ep. 2). Frankie demands absolute loyalty, even slaying Magda and Heather’s beloved porcine pet when they dare to go against her. While Fox largely plays it straight as the quietly-terrifying matriarch, her crime ‘family’ sometimes subvert her aura of menace with criminal ineptitude. Stretch (Jalen Sutcliffe) sets off a classic gangland-style shootout when he accidentally shoots a Russian mobster, his sweet face intoning “Shit. Sorry!” before all hell breaks loose (ep. 8).

While much Australian crime comedy has favoured lower-class underdogs (Dolgoplov 85), *Bay of Fires* flips the protagonist to the upper-class Stella, with many of the series’ initial comic moments arising from her fish-out-of-water adjustment to her new home, including trading her designer clothes for local op shop finds and moving into a barely-standing house. Stella’s classist view of the criminals she meets also plays on the critique of white Anglo privilege that Dolgoplov observes in other Australian crime comedies (86). However, it doesn’t take long for Stella to join the ranks of her new criminal neighbours, albeit inadvertently. Francis’s brutal gang-style killing is contrasted by Stella’s panicked disposal of a public servant she runs over (eps. 3-4), demonstrative of the neo-noir comic trope involving accidental killers and troublesome corpses (Short 187). She also uses her business acumen to bring white-collar crime to the town, with a plan to avoid becoming another of Frankie’s gruesome victims by generating cash through embezzlement.

Dusseldorp describes the series as a “drama, comedy, thriller” which aims for a tone “like *Ozark* meets *Fargo* meets *Schitt’s Creek*” (qtd. in *ABC Radio National*). Some critics believe the show struggles to balance this tone, with Mel Campbell stating it “reels between comedy and drama in a stressful and frustrating way”, with lead Dusseldorp “simultaneously the most dramatic onscreen and the most unrealistically clownish”. Any style of comedy is subjective, and as such audiences will respond differently to the show’s tonal inflections; personally, I laughed out loud several times. Overall, the series draws on the landscape aesthetic of *Tassie Noir*, the classic noir tropes of organised crime and shady underworlds, and neo-noir’s darkly comic use of violence. Underpinning this are Australian Noir/comic-crime’s quirky rural sensibilities and penchant for skilful ensemble casting.

Conclusion

While we have produced a spate of excellent Australian Noir drama on screens big and small, we just cannot help laughing at ourselves, so the appearance of Australian comedy-noir is no surprise. Reading *Thou Shalt Not Steal* using Greg Dolgoplov's comprehensive analysis of Outback Noir's features reveals that the series redeploys these to hilarious effect, while maintaining its own narrative integrity and originality. Shows such as *Deadloch* prove that we can walk the comic-noir tightrope, and turn an even newer niche sub-genre (Tassie Noir, itself borne of Scandi Noir) into a slick and entertaining crime comedy with a surprisingly heartfelt buddy-cop twist. *Bay of Fires*, whilst not quite as successfully hitting its comic targets, nonetheless imbues the Australian Noir tropes of small-town secrets and colourful crooks with a few dark laughs. As Jonathan Rayner notes, Australian Gothic cinema embraced the "subversive impact [of] incongruities and startling juxtapositions of horror and humour" (31). *Deadloch*, and *Bay of Fires*, as hybrid comedy-gothic-noirs, delight in such juxtapositions and push the incongruity further by punctuating Tasmania's picture-postcard landscapes with horrific violence.

Sue Short points out that other black comedy TV noirs such as *Twin Peaks* and *Fargo* (2014-2024) present an "idyllic town with a dark underside" (207). This is inherent in *Deadloch*, which embeds the rural crime trope where everyone is a suspect (Turnbull), and in *Bay of Fires*, with its (somewhat less idyllic) town of mysterious misfits. The outback landscape and rural settings are another hallmark of the Australian Gothic (Rayner 83) and have organically bled into small-screen crime settings. *Thou Shalt Not Steal* consciously takes its visual lead from "noir/Gothic Westerns" like *Mystery Road* (Rayner 117), then adds its own comic subversions. Mel Campbell's comment that "*Deadloch* [indulges in] the procedural pleasures of rural noir yet [is] ruthlessly willing to lampoon the genre's clichés" mirrors Short's assertion that "lampooning well-worn conventions is not an affirmation of noir's demise [but reflects a] need to imaginatively reinvent the genre" (197). It is also refreshing to find all three series featuring female leads and prominent female supporting roles, with a combination of established actors and rising young Indigenous talent. What we are observing in these comic noirs is the imaginative reinvention not only of broader concepts of noir, but also of Australian Noir itself.

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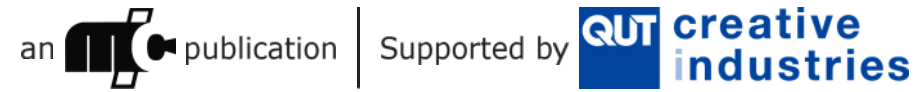
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