Bran Nue Dae, directed by Rachel Perkins

Text synopsis

Bran Nue Dae breaks new ground in Australian cinema by celebrating Aboriginal culture and life in a musical film.

The film is about an Aboriginal teenager, Willie (Rocky McKenzie), growing up in the 1960s in Broome, a pearling port town in northern Western Australia. Willie is keen on Rosie (Jessica Mauboy), but his pious mother wants him to become a priest and sends him away to a boarding school in Perth run by Father Benedictus (Geoffrey Rush). Willie misses home and Rosie, and he rebels. After rousing the other boys at the school to resistance, he runs away and begins the trip home, aided by Uncle Tadpole (Ernie Dingo). The two hitch a ride north with a hippy couple (Missy Higgins and Tom Budge). They have adventures along the way before they find Rosie and discover that she is going out with someone else. When Father Benedictus finally catches up with them, all sorts of secrets are revealed and relationships are changed forever.

Bran Nue Dae explores issues that are important to Aboriginal people—including dispossession, land rights, injustice and inequality—but it also finds new ways in which to explore Aboriginal identity. Bran Nue Dae is a musical that celebrates being Aboriginal in a wickedly humorous manner. It is full of sight gags (the pointed bone), exaggerations (Geoffrey Rush’s caricature of a German priest), movement and colour. While the dispossession of Aboriginal people and culture is central to many songs, and to the song ‘Nothing I Would Rather Be’ in particular, the overall mood of the film moves between ironic humour and resilience, celebration and courage, and defiance and exuberance.
Links to Australian Curriculum: English at Years 9/10

This unit covers the following strands and sub-strands of the Australian Curriculum: English.

The unit aims to enrich students’ understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, and incorporates some of the general capabilities.

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Features to consider

When you read or view a text, it is important to consider when and where the text was created (its background and context), and how the text is structured. These features help your understanding and analysis, and lead to a more informed evaluation and response.

In the twenty-first century, film is one of the most important communication media. Its ability to entertain, persuade and influence makes this multimodal medium a powerful agent of change.

Background and context

*Bran Nue Dae* (2010) was written by Rachel Perkins and Reg Cribb and was based on the stage musical *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) written by Jimmy Chi.

Perkins, who directed the film, belongs to a distinguished Aboriginal family and has directed several successful Australian films, including *Radiance* and *One Night the Moon*. Her father, Charles Perkins, was the first Indigenous Australian to graduate from university and was a member of the Freedom Riders, a group of activists who travelled across New South Wales in a bus to protest against discrimination against Aborigines in 1964.

Chi was born in Broome in 1948 and has Chinese, Japanese, Scottish and Aboriginal ancestry. He is a composer, musician and playwright. Chi drew on his own experiences at boarding school and in Broome in the 1960s to write the play and the songs. Chi has been made a State Living Treasure in Western Australia.

Willie and his mum are regular churchgoers.
It is important to note that *Bran Nue Dae* comes from a real place and a real community. The film was shot on location in Broome and Perth, and moves between real outback and urban landscapes.

Broome is situated on the land of the Yawuru people of Western Australia. It was founded as a pearling port in 1889, and its Aboriginal, Asian and European population reflects its multicultural history. During World War II, Japanese air raids led to many people from Broome being interned because they had Japanese ancestry. After the war, the pearling industry gradually recovered, tourism and mining added to Broome’s economy, and a unique and vibrant town was created.

In the documentary *The Story of Bran Nue Dae* (2010) Chi said that he ‘hoped *Bran Nue Dae* would bring about change’. In the same documentary, Perkins said she wanted the film to ‘uplift and move people and make them laugh’.

**Text structure**

Road movies are a popular film genre, and so too are musicals. A road movie always involves a journey and often also includes a quest. A musical interweaves songs and dancing into a film’s narrative. *Bran Nue Dae* uses elements of both genres to explore the physical and emotional journey of Willie as he discovers more about himself and his people.

A structural feature of many musical films is the ‘set piece’ or ‘show stopper’, a scene when many characters sing and dance in a big number. One example of a show stopper in *Bran Nue Dae* is the church scene and the song ‘Nothing I Would Rather Be’. Powerfully emotional scenes such as these are reminiscent of stage productions. In such scenes it can appear as if the performers are appealing directly to the audience. This is because of the camera orientation, which places the singers and dancers directly in front of viewers, and gestures that encourage viewers’ participation in the scene.

While the plot and structure of *Bran Nue Dae* is essentially chronological—Willie is sent to school in Perth, runs away and joins up with Uncle Tadpole to return to Broome—the director also uses flashback scenes. These scenes are set in an earlier time, before the main story, or are sudden and vivid memories of a past event. For example, in *Bran Nue Dae* flashbacks are used to remind the viewer of the love interest between Willie and Rosie and to explore the disturbing treatment of Aboriginal people.

**Interpret, analyse, evaluate**

Filmmakers use plot, setting, characterisation and dialogue to get their message across, just as novelists and playwrights do. They also use the tools of filmmaking, such as cinematography, lighting and sound, which are all essential parts of the medium of film.

*Bran Nue Dae* is the result of many elements chosen and drawn together by the director, including plot, setting, characterisation, themes, structure and film techniques. When you analyse and interpret a film, you look closely at all its elements to develop an informed response. Some of the elements of a film that are important when interpreting, analysing and evaluating this film are discussed below.
Cinematography

Cinematography is the art of film photography. Directors and cinematographers carefully select different camera shots to shape viewers’ responses to the characters, ideas and images portrayed on screen. Cinematography allows the director to show the audience only what they want you to see by directing the camera at certain parts of the action. For example, a close-up shot that focuses closely on a character forces viewers to concentrate on the character’s actions or expressions. You see an example of this in Bran Nue Dae when the close-up on the boys’ faces as they see the Coca-Colas and Cherry Ripes in the fridge encourages you to share their delight at what they have found.

Another example of how the position of a camera influences what the viewer sees and how they respond is the aerial shot that shows Willie as he re-enters the boarding school. The aerial shot looks down on the action from directly above. In this case, it reinforces Willie’s reluctance to be at the school and the priest’s authority as he ushers Willie through the door.

Lighting

Lighting can change the atmosphere and mood of a film, and colour, shadow and contrast all help to direct viewers’ attention.

For example, in Bran Nue Dae the subdued lighting in the scene when Willie is in jail and dreams of the old people reinforces the weight and seriousness of this moment in the film. Here, you are reminded of the terrible treatment of Aboriginal people.

The subdued lighting of the jail scene is particularly notable as it contrasts with the otherwise bright lighting in the film. The movie was filmed on location in Western Australia’s bright sunshine, but the bright lighting also reinforces the film’s generally optimistic mood.

Intertextuality

References to other texts are known as ‘intertextuality’, and are where a writer or filmmaker borrows or transforms part of a work by someone else, or refers to other works using images or allusions. Intertextuality helps to shape a text’s meaning by referring to familiar ideas in other texts. References to older or more familiar works can help you to understand a new text. Intertextuality is like weaving; a writer gathers threads from many different garments and creates a new garment with elements of others.

In Bran Nue Dae, the song-and-dance scene when the boys sing ‘Nothing I Would Rather Be’ in the school chapel contains echoes of chorus lines from many American musicals.

One of the funniest sequences is when the Chooky Dancers from Arnhem Land’s Elcho Island give their interpretation of Mikis Theodorakis’s theme from Zorba the Greek in the back of the truck. This mixing of Aboriginal dance with music and dance from a 1960s movie and stage musical set in Greece produces a hilarious cultural hybrid that became a worldwide video-clip hit.
Editing
Directors and film editors select which shots to use in a film and in what order. Editing techniques such as flashbacks and flash forwards, fading, wiping and cutting help the viewer move from one scene to another and learn more about characters and events. Editing influences the way audiences respond to characters, settings and themes.

For example, in Bran Nue Dae, while Willie is at boarding school he has a flashback to catching fish at Broome. This flashback reinforces his homesickness and sense of displacement.

Sound
A film's sound has a powerful influence on your response. Just turn on the mute button during Bran Nue Dae and see what happens to your appreciation of the film.

When looking at a film's sound, you need to be aware of the two main types of sound:

- **Diegetic sound** comes from a source within the scene. It includes sounds such as characters’ dialogue, the sounds of vehicles, or the sound of a door closing. In Bran Nue Dae, the song ‘Nothing I Would Rather Be’ is an example of diegetic sound and an important statement about the identity of Indigenous Australians.
- **Non-diegetic sound** is sound that is not from within the scene. Examples of non-diegetic sound include voice-overs and background music, such as the background music when Willie is wandering the streets after running away from boarding school.
Text extract
A film trailer is a way for the film’s marketers to highlight the film’s most attractive elements for prospective audiences.

Go online to watch a trailer of the film *Bran Nue Dae*. While several trailers were made for *Bran Nue Dae*, this chapter will focus on the one found on the *Bran Nue Dae* [website] http://www.brannuedaemovie.com/#/film-clips.

Features to consider in this trailer
Although a trailer is not a whole film, watching it does allow insights into aspects of the film. The trailer of *Bran Nue Dae* shows many of the film techniques used in the whole film and encapsulates the director’s challenge of Aboriginal stereotypes.

Purpose and audience
A film trailer only shows you selected extracts from a film. The trailer’s purpose is to persuade you to see the film. Some might say it shows you the best bits, but a trailer also often provides a condensed version of the film so that audiences can get a snapshot of the plot. The initial impression you gain from the trailer can be tested against your subsequent viewing of the whole film.

A film trailer is usually shown as a preview in cinemas, on television and online to encourage audiences to pay to see the movie in cinemas, or later, to buy the DVD or pay to download the movie. It is only through audiences’ paying to see a film that film creators can continue to make movies.

Film techniques
If you watch the trailer several times, you will see the film techniques at work. Look at the clues the trailer gives you about the movie’s cinematography, sound, lighting and editing.

Because a trailer is by definition a condensed version of the film, consider how film techniques are used differently in a trailer. For example, a trailer quickly jumps between snippets of scenes; the final film allows you to appreciate entire scenes. Trailers also often have a voice-over telling you about the film; this unseen commentator is not part of the whole film.

Prediction
A movie trailer provides a snapshot of the plot. It also reveals clues about the characters, setting and the theme. Of course, a trailer does not give you the full picture or you probably would not bother to see the film.

A trailer can be a wonderful way to test your prediction skills. You watch the trailer and try to predict what will happen in the movie. Then, test your predictions by watching the full version.

In *Bran Nue Dae*’s trailer, the rural and urban settings—a large city, a coastal town and a desert—are briefly glimpsed, as are the main characters—the Aboriginal boys, the older priest, tribal elder and tourists. Watch the trailer and try comparing your initial impressions based on the trailer with what you learn about the settings and characters from the whole film.
Challenging the stereotype

Filmmakers can try to capture a true likeness of people and places. They can also challenge stereotypical portrayals of people and places.

*Bran Nue Dae* is different from many other texts by and about Aborigines. In the past, Aboriginal people were often reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes in Australian films and books, and frequently portrayed as victims. As Aboriginal writers established themselves, they dealt with the heartache and despair of the Stolen Generations and the dispossession of many Aboriginal communities.

To stereotype is to reduce somebody to an oversimplified category, to label, pigeonhole or typecast them. *Bran Nue Dae* also uses stereotypes and caricatures, but it does so deliberately and ironically to poke fun at the stereotypes and, through humour, challenge them. Perkins plays with the old stereotypes and turns them on their heads through deliberate exaggeration, for example, the pointing the bone incident. She celebrates Aboriginal kinship, culture and pride by showing the strong links between Aboriginal people, such as Uncle Tadpole helping Willie to get back to Broome and the communal singing and dancing.

1 **Trailer highlights**

   The film trailer for *Bran Nue Dae* contains several of the film's highlights.

   a Working in groups, note the scenes that are used and which section of the whole film they come from.

   b Watch the whole film. Then, justify or challenge the scenes that were included in the trailer. Which other scenes do you think should have been included? Could any scenes in the trailer have been left out? Why? Explain your reasons, referring to the film.

2 **Website**

   Working in groups, explore the *Bran Nue Dae* [website], www.BranNueDaeMovie.com/#/home focusing on the 'About the Film' and 'News & Reviews' sections. Each member of the group is responsible for examining a different part of the website—such as filmmakers and cast biographies, production notes or the links to interviews—and selecting material to share with the rest of the group.

   When you have shared the information, prepare a brief report for the class. Extra kudos will be given to any group that can find out the origin and reason for the spelling of the film's title.

3 **Research**

   Do some research to find out about the film's context. What was the historical and cultural background of Broome in the late 1960s?

4 **Analyse the humour**

   Working in pairs, select two humorous incidents in *Bran Nue Dae* and explain how the director uses film techniques—such as dialogue, movement, characterisation and cinematography—to make you laugh.

   Ask yourself whether there is a serious message hidden in the humour in the chosen scenes. If so, what is it?
5 Characterisation

In groups, write a response to the following questions. Then use your group’s responses as the basis for a report to the whole class.

When considering characterisation, look at the elements a filmmaker uses to create a picture of each character, such as dialogue (including what they say and how they say it, accent and word choice), costume and appearance, interactions and relationships with others, and cinematography.

a Willie is the main character of Bran Nue Dae, and you follow his journey. Compare Willie’s character at the beginning of the film and at the end. What has Willie learnt and how has the director showed you that development?

b Is Uncle Tadpole presented in a positive light, a negative light, or a bit of both? Give examples from the film showing how the director conveys different aspects of his character.

c How are other characters—such as Father Benedictus, Lester and Rosie—represented?

6 Advertising campaign

Working in a group, create a multimedia campaign to promote Bran Nue Dae. Your presentation must include at least four of the following components:

• a PowerPoint presentation that pitches the idea of the movie to Screen Australia for funding
• an interview with the writer or director (assign someone to research Chi or Perkins and someone to play the role of the writer or director)
• a poster to promote the film
• a review of the film for a newspaper, magazine or movie website
• vox pop (voice of the people) recommendations from people who enjoyed the film
• any other idea that you have negotiated with your teacher.

To develop your campaign, you will need to do some research. Search for reviews and interviews, and read or watch other work by the author and director.

When you have completed all the components of your campaign, present your work to your class. To deliver the most successful presentation, allocate roles to each group member and plan ahead for any equipment you might need.
Texts to take you further: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

All Australians can benefit from learning more about the cultures that existed on this continent thousands of years before European settlement. It is pleasing to see the wide and increasing range of Indigenous literature available today—from songs and poetry, to novels, memoirs and films. You are encouraged to explore these texts for a deeper understanding of Indigenous history and culture.

*Bran Nue Dae* paints a positive picture of Aboriginal culture while at the same time alluding to the often appalling treatment of Aboriginal people in the past.

Well-researched fictional accounts—such as Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and Greg Silvey’s *Jasper Jones*, which portrays an Aboriginal youth from the 1960s—can help you understand the history of Aboriginal people. As can some of the poems in *Antipodes: Poetic Responses*, edited by Margaret Bradstock.

Non-fiction texts such as Carmel Bird’s *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, the speeches of former prime ministers Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd, and Linda Burney’s maiden speech as an Indigenous member of the New South Wales parliament, all shed light on the prejudices and mistreatment Aboriginal people often encountered.

The true account of the return of an Aboriginal skull for burial in John Danalis’s *Riding the Black Cockatoo* also reveals much about past attitudes and present reconciliations.

**Fiction**
- Kate Grenville, *The Secret River*
- Phillip Gwynne, *Deadly, Unna?*
- Greg Silvey, *Jasper Jones*

**Non-fiction**
- Carmel Bird (ed.), *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*
- John Danalis, *Riding the Black Cockatoo*
- Chloe Hooper, *The Tall Man*
- Sally Morgan, *My Place*
- Ros Moriarty, *Listening to Country*
- Boori Monty Pryor with Meme McDonald, *Maybe Tomorrow*
- Leah Purcell, *Black Chicks Talking*

**Poetry**
- Margaret Bradstock (ed.), *Antipodes: Poetic Responses*
- Ali Cobby Eckermann, *Ruby Moonlight*
Song
- Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody, ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’
- Archie Roach, ‘Took the Children Away’

Film
- Mabo, directed by Rachel Perkins
- One Night the Moon, directed by Rachel Perkins
- Rabbit-Proof Fence, directed by Phillip Noyce

Drama
- Jane Harrison, Stolen and Rainbow’s End

Speeches
- Paul Keating, ‘Redfern Speech’, 10 December 1992

Picture books
- John Marsden, The Rabbits (Shaun Tan, illustrator)
- Yalata and Oak Valley Communities with Christobel Mattingley, Maralinga: The Anangu Story

Television and radio
- Conversations with Richard Fidler (ABC radio), interview with Charlie King
- Enough Rope (ABC television), Andrew Denton interviews Deborah Mailman
- First Australians, directed by Rachel Perkins

Digital
- [Dust Echoes], http://www.abc.net.au/dustechoes/default.htm ABC website for Aboriginal Dreamtime stories