

# beDevil

## study guide

### INTRODUCTION

This study guide is written for English, History, Aboriginal Studies, Media and Visual Arts students. The guide suggests how teachers may use the film to extend their students' capacities to think and write critically and creatively. The film will challenge them to listen carefully, analyse information and is certain to stimulate lively debate.

*beDevil* is an innovative and challenging film and it is suggested that students be familiar with the film's structure and the outline of the three stories before viewing. Brief synopses of the three stories are given below:

#### MR. CHUCK

The sandy shores and the breezy bungalows of Bribie Island play host to a strange and eerie story. Years back an American GI drove his truck into the quicksand after a party. The pervasive malevolence of the GI's presence is still felt by many who live and have lived on the island. However, there is another underlying evil that remains unspoken. Rick experienced both and lives to tell the tale.

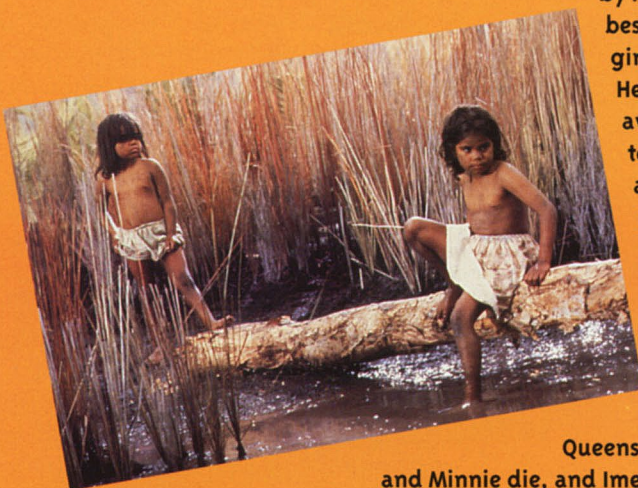
#### CHOO CHOO CHOO CHOO

The desolate plains of outback Queensland and a railroad track which starts somewhere in the past and never seems to end provide the parameters of another ghostly story. Ruby and her family are haunted by invisible trains which run on the track beside her house. The ghost of a young girl killed by a train never finds peace. Her lament drives Ruby and her family away. After many years Ruby returns to experience the ghostly presence yet again.

#### LOVIN' THE SPIN I'M IN

Imelda's people are traditional folk of the Torres Strait Islands. When her son Bebe and his love, Minnie leave their community to escape opposition to their marriage, Imelda follows them to a small northern Queensland town. Tragedy strikes - Bebe

and Minnie die, and Imelda, in her overwhelming grief continues to mourn the loss. But, as the young boy across the road discovers, the doomed couple never find peace. The spirits of Minnie and Bebe dance on in the condemned warehouse as the would-be developers find that Bebe and Minnie will not be removed from the only home they know.





## ENGLISH SECTION

*beDevil* is a challenging and rewarding film. It opens many areas for discussion including the construction of narrative, setting and character development. Furthermore, there is considerable scope for an imaginative response from the audience.

Following a structure of three childhood mysteries, the film presents opportunities to examine the significance of childhood memories.

The first story, *Mr Chuck*, develops the idea of an event in the past, in this case an American GI who had crashed his truck in a swamp during the Second World War, and how it can dominate the present.

Through the use of sound and visual techniques which hint at some pending event in the swamp, the audience is made aware of something not quite readily explained.

How is mystery maintained in the story? What did you think was going to happen? How was this feeling created? How would you describe the opening of *Mr Chuck*?

Narration is provided by Mr Chuck, who recalls his childhood, when he was seven, and the Ghost Swamp. The swamp dominates this first story and stresses one of the major preoccupations of the film – the landscape.

Why do you think the landscape is important? What does it add to the story? What effect does it have on the characters?

*Mr Chuck* also offers potential discussion on the representation of Aboriginal and white children. How would you describe the first meeting of the white and black children? How are the Aboriginal children depicted? How are the white children depicted? Why does Rick slash the cinema seats?

Do you see any symbolic significance in the building of a cinema over the swamp? Has the poster on the wall any importance to our understanding of the circumstances of the American GI's death?

For further writing and research activities, find out where American GIs were based in northern Australia during the war. Write a story based on a character who was a GI in Australia during the war.

The second story, *Choo Choo Choo Choo*, maintains a sense of mystery and the unexplained, first identified in *Mr Chuck*. This time, an

imaginary train disturbs the inhabitants on the desolate plains of outback Queensland.

Once more, landscape is of vital importance to an understanding of the story and the film as a whole. In this story, the past, as represented in the whistling of the unseen train, roars into the present and yet somehow seems unexplained. Why is the train important to the story? Do you think



it is a real train?

Explain the reasons for your answer. What is the function of the young girl and the peg doll? What effect do they have on Ruby and her family? Listen critically and carefully to the repetition of the girl's lament throughout the story. It provides a link of pain which eventually is too much for the family.

The story offers many opportunities for discussion and imaginative writing. Themes which can be profitably explored are: unseen fears and their strength on modifying behaviour, the importance of landscape as a way of emphasizing the bleakness of the lives of the characters and how a sense of time is evoked.

This story offers scope for writing about not only the unexplained but also family relationships and roles. One scene in particular involves Stompie Morphet, returning to the family home after a hunting trip with a kangaroo over his shoulder. The scene represents the hunter as a providing figure for his family and it may be of some value to consider gender roles at this point.

The third story, *Lovin' The Spin I'm In* draws on the force of traditional beliefs and what breaking them may mean. Why do Bebe and Minnie leave their community of Torres Strait Islanders? Why does Bebe's mother, Imelda, follow them?

What happens to Bebe and Minnie? What does the young boy, living across the road, come to understand about Bebe and Minnie? Why doesn't he tell anyone about what he finds out?

In what ways do the buildings and background add to the story? Do you find the setting natural? Why did the director, Tracey Moffatt, also choose to shoot this story in a studio as opposed to a real street in the inner city? What do you think the main theme of this story is?

This story, unlike the other two, has a certain level of humour about it. The developers are drawn to represent the typical sharp operators intent on making fast money. The study of the opportunistic dealers, whose





plans fail owing to the awareness of the spirit dancers, is an interesting area of the story to consider.

The three stories which make up the film, *beDevil*, while being separate, can be looked at collectively. There are several areas for discussion and writing which can be adopted to each or all three stories. In addition to this, there are some linkages between all three parts.

Beginning with childhood, how does the film represent it? Are there experiences shown in the film which are similar to what is encountered today? How important are childhood recollections to people? Do things happen in childhood which shape the way we view things later in life?

In the film, how convincing are the characters? Do you identify with them in any way? Do cultural and racial differences preclude understanding of experiences? Are their specific gender roles or does the film break away from traditional descriptions of roles?

In each of the films, the family as a social unit is explored. How important is this to an understanding of the stories? Do the stories offer any new insights into relationships and family life?

In each story there is a clear sense of the unexplained and the mysterious. How is this created? Does the landscape help to give a sense of menace? If so, how? How do the music and sound effects add to the film?



The narrative structure of the film relies on more elements than dialogue. What are these elements and how is the story communicated through a variety of means? Is it successful? Comment on the creation of mood and atmosphere in each story. Are they evoked differently in each one? If so, how?

The three stories are connected not only by the thematic concerns of childhood and mystery, but also music. The eerie and almost discordant, jangling sounds link the events of each story. Is this effective? How else could the stories be linked?

As you watch the film, have you thought about events in your own past which have impacted on your present? What kinds of experiences stay in the mind from childhood?

Reflecting on the stories, are there villains in the film? How are they, if they exist, represented? What are they attempting to do and are they fairly drawn? Are they human?

As the main thrust of the film is addressing the nature of the unexplained, you might like to think about whether you believe that ghosts exist. Perhaps you could discuss the circumstances which may lead to a ghost occurring.

To get the best from this film, it requires patient viewing and a readiness to be challenged by its structure and lack of dependence on full dialogue. It raises

many important and substantial issues for classroom discussion and personal writing. Moreover, there are several research opportunities which could be developed from the film's background of indigenous peoples' culture, perception of time and historical context.

## HISTORY SECTION

The three stories which make up the film represent three different periods of Australian history. Although there are pointers which loosely date the stories, the film's strength lies in the timeless quality of the events.

It is relatively simple to date the first story, *Mr Chuck*, set initially during World War Two. For Australia's involvement, this stretched from 1939 until 1945. Interestingly, the main and unseen character of *Mr Chuck*, is an American GI soldier. What do the initials "GI" stand for?

The unfolding mystery of the missing GI takes place on Bribie Island and, historically, this raises a number of important questions.

To place the film more precisely, find out where Bribie Island actually is. More to the point, find out when Americans were stationed on the Island and in what numbers.

Further questions could be based on the relations between the local Island people and the Americans. Were

the Americans welcomed by everyone? What was their role and how long did they stay? Answers to these questions should help to fix the film in its historical context.

See if you can discover whether there was a cinema constructed on Bribie Island. Furthermore, you might be able to find out what films were actually screened.

The second story in the film offers more scope for further research. The great railway age in Australia occurred in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Trains opened up outback areas and provided employment for people ranging from rail gangs to station staff.

The story, *Choo Choo Choo Choo*, is about a family in outback Queensland who are responsible for track maintenance. Looking at the film, try and place the people in their historical period. What are their clothes like? Is the train sound that of a steam or diesel locomotive? Try and find out when the last steam train ran in outback Queensland. What type of trains are used today?



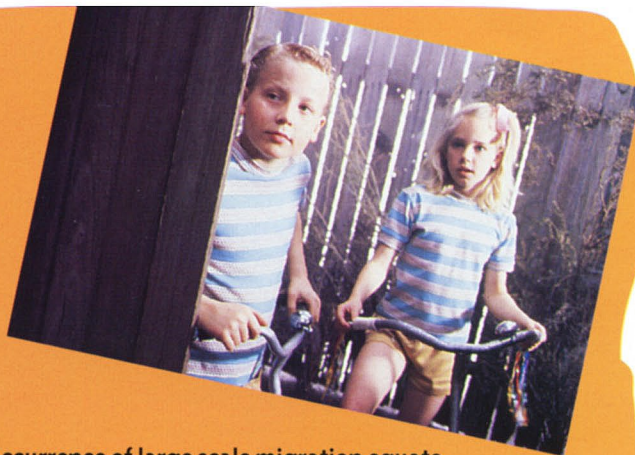


For many people, particularly women, in the outback rail settlements, life was tough. With a predominantly male culture of mateship and hardship, there was little in the way of support for women. Look up books which give personal accounts of life on the railways and see if the film confirms your findings.

For a more updated assignment, you may like to look at the spread of the railways in Queensland and see how many stations are staffed. Try and write from the perspective of a person working on the railway in the outback. What would your day entail? What amusements would you have and what pleasures and hardships? You might like to keep a diary of a week or more.

The third story in *beDevil, Lovin' The Spin I'm In*, is not fixed in any particular period. From the sets and the language of the characters, not to mention the attention on the idea of developers moving into a city centre area, the story is fluid in terms of its significance. It does not depend on an understanding of a historical period.

Having said that, there are several threads which can be traced with history in mind. Migration to urban areas is not a new thing. Try and find out when the first European migrants arrived in Queensland. Does the



occurrence of large scale migration equate with economic opportunities? Trace the patterns of migration after the Second World War. See if you can establish a map of settlement over the last fifty years and note the changes. Attempt to offer reasons for any changes in the patterns of urban migrant occupation.

During the last twenty years, once disused areas of most Australian cities, particularly around their wharf areas, have been reclaimed by developers. Find out where this has taken place and try and date the development. Has it meant that people have had to move out? If so, where have they moved to?

## ABORIGINAL STUDIES SECTION

Since Australia's settlement by whites in 1788, the Aboriginal communities of this land have suffered considerably. The stories in this film portray aspects of Aboriginal life which prompt discussion of the historical treatment and conditions Aborigines have endured.

The first story, *Mr Chuck*, provides an account of the way Aborigines have been perceived by authority for much of their history. How are the children presented? Are they shown as being disobedient and untrustworthy? Is this a fair representation or is the film attempting to use this as a way of raising awareness of the danger of stereotyping people?

The main character, Rick, is shown in the film as a child and as an old man. What impression do you have of him as a child and as a man? What ideas are given about Aboriginal culture?

Look carefully at the swamp scenes where the Aboriginal children are cast against the background of landscape. Does this indicate that they are at home with the land and understand it? Compare the men who come to build the cinema with their foreign tools, timber and mannerisms. What contrasts does this provide when set against the quiet Aboriginal spectators?

The story, *Choo Choo Choo Choo*, portrays Aborigines in a very different way. The work they are involved in is hard. The railway is remote and the characters are set against the enormity of the landscape. Do

they look comfortable? Compare this with the scene where Stompie returns to the house with a kangaroo over his shoulder. What is his attitude? Do you think he looks comfortable? Why is he singing?

As a research topic, look at the kind of work Aborigines have done throughout white Australian history. What does this say about the way Aborigines are viewed? The film also reveals something of the Aborigines' particular and spiritual relationship with the land. How is this shown in the story?

The idea of the spiritual dimension of Aboriginal Culture is furthered in *Lovin' The Spin I'm In*. Here the story reveals important statements on Aboriginal society.

The setting is essentially urban and this suggests a number of important issues for Aboriginal studies. What kind of housing do Aborigines have in the city? Do you think this is appropriate? What type of housing do the characters have in the story? Is there a difference? Why?

The story presents some powerful statements on the importance of family ties for the Aboriginal community. How are these ties exposed? Are they different from other Australian families? If so, how?

Traditional society for the Aborigines has a number of ideas and beliefs that some non-Aboriginals may find difficult to understand. In the film *Bebe and Minnie* leave their traditional home in the Torres Strait and move to a small northern Queensland town. They do this because of opposition to their marriage. What is your view on the power of traditional beliefs in today's society?



## Media Studies Section

### BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM

Find a definition of *beDevil*. Using your definition together with the title of the film, what sorts of themes and issues do you think might be explored in the film?

What is a feature film? How does it differ from a documentary, short film, cartoon or other filmic forms?

### AFTER VIEWING THE FILM

What are the three stories about? How are they linked? (refer to your discussion about *beDevil* and the title)

What are the areas of commonality within each of the stories?

Is *beDevil* a feature film? If you believe it is not, then what is it? Do you know of other films presented as a trilogy? Why is this form used to tell the ghost stories?

"*BeDevil* is an art department tour de force." [Martin Brown, Art Director] What does Brown mean by this? What evidence is there in each of the stories to support his comment?

Comment about the sets used in *Choo Choo Choo*? Note for instance, the railway sleepers. In *Lovin' The Spin I'm In*, pay particular attention to the boards on the warehouse. Look

at the colours used throughout *beDevil* - skies in particular are garishly toned and in other stories whole scenes take on a particular hue.

Why has the film-maker used this approach?

As the netball team arrives in Charleville the townspeople standing on the footpaths act out a charade. Watch this section closely. What are they trying to communicate?

"She's here! She's here!" Who is here?

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES/DISCUSSION

Tracey Moffatt has made two short films - *Nice Colored Girls* and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*. She is also a still photographer with work in both private and public collections. If possible view her other work both still and motion picture.

Does any of this work inform *beDevil*?

Moffatt cites Nicolas Roeg, Peter Weir and Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* as being strongly influential.

View the work of one or more of these directors. Are there parallels in Moffatt's film?

"The medium of film provides entertainment and food for thought. It can also be a way of exploring new states of mind and a means of carrying us into completely new areas." [R. Horrocks & P. Tremewan, *On Film II*, p.71]

Comment in relation to Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil*.

Sound plays a key role in *beDevil*. In addition to the music there are specific sounds accompanying key moments. If watching *beDevil*, on video, and before students see the film, turn the visuals to a blank screen. Allow students to listen to aspects of the sound effects.

What images are conjured?

What is being conveyed to you? What is happening?

Can you isolate specific sounds? (The sound editor has used a roaring furnace, grumbling possums, an F1-11, and the roar of a tiger as well as more conventional sounds.)

## Visual Arts Section

### BACKGROUND

One of the outcomes of the National Collaborative Curriculum Project for Australian Schools is *The Arts - the National Profile*, in which there are five arts form strands. The *Visual Arts* strand is developed under strand organisers. In this section we will be looking at two strand organisers,

- arts criticism and aesthetics
- past and present contexts.

Visual Arts students should be involved in arts criticism and aesthetics (engaging in arts discourse and making personal responses to art works), and in understanding of the past and present contexts within which the arts are made (knowledge of arts history, study of arts in different cultural contexts and awareness of issues).

In the Profiles there are eight levels of learning. The following activities are intended for students at level 7 or 8. The work of students at these two levels would be expected to indicate differing levels of perception, imagination and skills.

Note: Activities suggested in this study guide require forward planning on the part of the teacher. It is recommended that these notes are read before organising an excursion to see the film.

Students could be encouraged to collect reviews of the film from a range of daily papers as pre-reading material.

Previewing or focus questions could be extracted from the notes, and activities given to students, to enable them to view the film from a more analytical viewpoint.

### INTRODUCTION

Art students are accustomed to discussing works of art (paintings, sculpture, prints, drawings and moving images including film) in which certain aesthetic qualities are analysed and compared with the work of other artists. Although usually they discuss more traditional media, there are a range of artistic elements in *beDevil* (eg. use of colour and depth for particular effect) which lend themselves to very stimulating discussion.

### CRITICISM AND AESTHETICS

In the press notes it says that although *beDevil* is about landscapes that go on forever, the claustrophobia of the scenes shot in the studio contradict the clichés of Australia's wide open spaces. After seeing *beDevil* write a personal response to this statement. In the response clarify how your views compare with what other critics may have said about the use of depth.

Prepare a review of *beDevil* for publication in the school magazine, which describes, interprets and makes personal comment upon the film, with particular reference to the contrast of imagery between the studio sequences and the location scenes



(eg. the house in *Choo Choo Choo Choo*).

Use *beDevil* to show how art can be used as a vehicle for conveying social comment. Write about your ideas in relation to this suggestion and indicate which parts of the film indicate social comment (eg. the woman on Bribie Island, talking about how they ignored the obvious problems of the Aboriginal children, in *Mr Chuck*, or the young Ruby compared with the older Ruby in *Choo Choo Choo Choo*). Give other examples of this subtle use of social comment.

### DESIGN ELEMENTS

Watch the titles of an old *James Bond* movie on video, then compare the design for the titles of *beDevil*. Do you think the juxtaposition of geometric forms and organic forms is an effective device in the titles of *beDevil*? Discuss the similarities and differences between the *James Bond* movie of your choice and *beDevil*.

Do you think the titles are effective in:

- capturing your attention?
- giving you an idea of what the film is about?

Write a short critique to explain your views. You could refer to some of the design elements used to achieve the effects such as space, form, contrast and colour.

Colour has been used to create mood and atmosphere throughout the film *beDevil*. Look at ways in which colour has been used to create mood in the work of an artist you have studied recently, and then look for examples of moody colour in *beDevil*. Compare the ways in which this is done in the two mediums.

Describe the scene that you consider the strangest, and explain what sort of colours have been used to make the scene so unusual.

Look at the work of surrealist artists such as Salvador Dali or René Magritte, and then study the landscapes in the film, particularly in *Choo Choo Choo Choo* and *Lovin' The Spin I'm In*. Discuss possible influences on the director in her choice of locations. Do you think they were based on fact or fantasy? Why?

Describe scenes in *beDevil* where the use of colour has been used to ensure that a particular person or object was the centre of attention. (eg. the woman watching for the train in *Choo Choo Choo Choo*). Explain whether you consider this has been achieved effectively, or how you think the effect could have been heightened.

Describe key colours used to create particular moods in the film. For example the opening scenes of *Mr Chuck* are almost monochromatic. Do you think there is another reason for the use of a limited number of colours. Do they enhance the naturalism of the opening sequences, or do you think they may have another purpose?

Throughout *Mr Chuck* there is a consistent use of pattern in almost every scene. List some of these and discuss the effect they have on the scenes they are in. Why do you think the Director has caused them to be such a feature? Compare the use of manufactured patterns (crochet, concrete bricks,

car tyres, seats in the cinema) with natural patterns (eg. ridges in sand, mangrove roots).

Towards the end of *Lovin' The Spin I'm In* there is a very dramatic shot of a car seen from above. Describe the artistic elements that are used to make this scene so effective? Why do you think these elements are used?

The colour in the final section of the film is quite different from the first one. Which colour predominates. Why do you think the Director used it so often?

### SPACE, DEPTH AND LANDSCAPE

In class, discuss Surrealist artists' paintings in which depth is accentuated by exaggerated use of artistic elements such as shape, line, colour and perspective.

Do you think the Director of *beDevil* has been influenced by Surrealism? Give examples to support your opinion.

Describe the scenes which you consider demonstrate the use of depth most effectively. Write an analysis of the design elements used (eg. cool/warm colours, overlapping shapes, tone etc.).

The use of landscape is very prominent in the work of some Australian artists, for example members of the Heidelberg School. Painters such as Fred McCubbin and Arthur Streeton could be said to paint the Australian landscape in a relatively realistic way.

After viewing the film, compare the use of landscape in the film to the depiction of landscape by an Australian painter from the Heidelberg School and a young woman artist whom you are currently studying. Does the woman's view of the Australian landscape relate to that of the Director of *beDevil*, Tracey Moffatt? Discuss in class.

Discuss the similarities and differences. Reference could be made in your discussion to scenes from the past in the film and scenes from the present.

Are the landscape scenes from the past intended to be realistic? Give reasons for your opinions. Do they compare with the work of more recent Australian artists, for example, Jeffrey Smart? Write a brief paper to explain your opinions, with examples from the film compared with examples from the artist's work. Use sketches to assist in clarifying your ideas.

### PAST AND PRESENT CONTEXTS

Each of the three segments of the film have two time frames in them (past and present). From your observation, can you describe the period in which each of the past segments of three parts of the film are set? Describe the images which make you think that this is so.

In *The Arts - National Profile* it is recommended that you examine the question *Who were the Great Women Artists?* With this in mind, find out as much as you can about Australian women film-makers, and make a list of them, and their films. In class discuss how your list relates to the number of women artists working in Australia.



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