Adi Wimmer

Australian Film

Cultures, Identities, Texts

focal point

Arbeiten zur anglistischen und amerikanistischen Medienwissenschaft
Studies in English and American Media

Herausgegeben von
Edited by
Jörg Helbig, Angela Krewani

Band
Volume
7

Adi Wimmer

Australian Film

Cultures, Identities, Texts

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Wimmer, Adi: Australian Film:
Cultures, Identities, Texts / Adi Wimmer. -
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007
(focal point ; vol. 7)
ISBN 978-3-86821-004-0

Cover Illustration: Sydney.
© Heebphoto, www.heebphoto.com

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007
ISBN 978-3-86821-004-0

No part of this book, covered by the copyright hereon,
may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means
without prior permission of the publisher.

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Bergstraße 27, D - 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, D - 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: 41504
Internet: http://www.wvttrier.de
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

Contents

1. Introduction: Problematizing Australian Film 1

2. A Contextual History of Australian Film 15

Pioneering Days 15
Early Nationalism and the 'Outback' Genre 17
The Demand for Quotas 23
Fresh Hopes After 1945 24
The 1970s Film Revival 27
The Ocker Film 29
The Era of the Period Film 34
Literary Adaptations 40
Film in the 1980s: TV Competition and the Blockbuster Genre 44
Trends of the 1990s 48
Hybridity and Multiculturalism 53

3. "We have given the whole country an international standing".
The Australian Film Industry and Australia's 'Cultural Cringe' 66

Australia's Cultural Self Image and its Relation to the World 66
Australian Cinema, 1900-1970: Self Expression vs. Finance 72
Australia's Honour Saved by the Period Films 73

4. Stepmother Earth: Representations of the Land
as the Female 'Other' in Australian Films 78

Australian Ideology: Nature, Society, Gender 79
Lost Children 84
The Mystical Rock that Swallowed Young Women 85
The Real Rock that Ate a Baby 86

5. The Unpleasantness of Class and History in our Houses:
The Bush-City Conflict in Australian Films 89

In Place of an Introduction, Three Hypotheses 89
Culture and 'Australianity' 91
Australian Films and 'Nation Building' 93
Jimmy Blacksmith 95
Australian War Films 96
Suburban Prowler 98
Two More Recent Examples 99

6. No More 'National Identity': Issues of Ethnicity and Alternative Sexual Orientation in Australian Movies of the 1990s 102

Hollywood Movies Made in Australia 104
Priscilla, Queen of the 90s 108
Toward the Postmodern: *Love and Other Catastrophes* and *Head On* 111

7. 'Australia is Part of Asia': Asian Representations in Australian Film and Australian Literature 116

Paul Keating and Asia 116
'Fear and Loathing': Asia as Australia's 'Other' 119
Asian Content in Australian Drama 122
Asia in Australian Films 128
Clara Law, Chinese-Australian Film Maker 138
Conclusion 153

8. Australia's Multicultural Film Genre 155

Foreword 155
Multiculturalism and the Australian Film Industry 156
Flight, Exile, Assimilation 160
The Land that Did Not Welcome 167
Other Migrant Novels 169
Trauma 170

9. The continuing obsession with the rural 176

The Farm 177
Love Serenade 179
The Dish 181
The Mullet 183
The Tracker 185

10. Conclusion 189

Works Cited 193

Filmography 207

1. Introduction: Problematizing Australian Film

> Problematization is synonymous with the 'application of knowledge' more generally. It not only represents and so defines the problem facing say Australian cinema, but it develops solutions for it. (O'Regan, 1996, 37)
>
> To borrow from another declaration, this Committee holds certain truths to be self-evident. Namely, that it is in the interest of this nation to encourage its local film and television industry so as to increase the quantity and improve the quality of local material in our cinemas and on our television screens. (Vincent Report, 1963)

As anyone engaged in 'Australian Studies' soon finds out, discourses "of the nation" are unusually strong and lively in Australia, more so than in Western European countries. The passage from the Vincent Report quoted above, co-opting as it does the 'sacred language' from no less a document than the American Constitution for such a trivial-seeming matter as Australian film policy, is evidence for the nation's tendency to take itself most seriously. For example, "Australianize everything" was a motto of the Australian Ministry of Education in its bid to revise its school syllabuses in the 1990s. Many explanations for this phenomenon of intense debate surrounding the notion of a 'collective identity' have been put forward. Australia, so it is said, is still a 'young' nation, naturally paying more attention than others to the 'discovery' of its social and cultural make-up. Australia is said to be an "anxious nation" (Walker, 1999) poised at the edge of civilization, far from its European origins. Being insecure and anxious, the nation naturally debates with more dedication than others (such as the British, who were enviously perceived by Australians as calm and self-assured about their identity)[1] how it is constituted. Then there is the colonial trauma. The first settlers were convicts, criminals that the motherland had banished as undesirable and third-rate. From such inauspicious origins it was difficult to construct a self-image which allowed for national pride and identification with a community. Even though early references to Australia's interior included promises that a "lost Eden" might lurk beyond the desert,

---

[1] Since the 1980s, Britain, too, has been engaged in exploring its changed nature. The influx of immigration and the increased visibility of Asian and Caribbean cultures, the various crises in the Royal family, the joining of the European Union, all of these have broken up the erstwhile certainties that were envied by Australians.

the trope, well-known from colonial American discourses, failed to take root. Australia, as Sneja Gunew states, "was resolutely postlapsarian" (1990, 103) The strained search for a positive identification explains why the fierce debate of the 'national type', or the nature of antipodean society, started within a few decades of the landing of the First Fleet in 1788. It is a debate which stubbornly refuses to go away; with the "history wars" declared in recent years it has reached hew heights oif intensity.[2] There is also the problematic heritage of an 'Anglo-Celtic' cultural background, which includes the sad (and until recently, hushed-up) history of the dispossession and rape of Aboriginality. Problematic not just because of the crimes that were committed in the name of that heritage, but also because Australia's present social fabric is no longer monocultural but *multi*cultural and *multi*ethnic.

At this point, some personal observations on how the above arguments are reflected in the day-to-day experience of an Australian Studies scholar may be in order. Before turning my attention to Australian literature and culture, my work was in American Studies, and for a while I pursued it and Australian Studies side by side. The most important professional academic association of the USA is the Modern Language Association: the qualifier 'American' does not appear in its title. It is safe to assume that 'American' is an unquestioned category, which would be superfluous to mention at all, and we thus have an unspoken assumption that the American nation is a metonymy for the whole world. Indeed, that is what the American soldiers in Vietnam called the USA: "The world". Moreover, "We are the world" was the official song of the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996. So it is not just the present American government that thinks America is the world, and the world is American, but a considerable part of American popular culture, too.

The Australian equivalent to the MLA is ASAL, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. More readily than the MLA, ASAL has warmly welcomed European members and their contributions. Indeed, what I have experienced again and again at Australian conferences is a kind of grateful wonder that European academics are interested at all in Australian culture. American academics take an interest in American culture for granted, while their more mod-

---

2 As an example one can cite the (unsuccessful) referendum of 6 November 1999 on whether Australia should cut its constitutional links with Britain and become a Republic, which was preceded by months of heated debate on what kind of society Australia was, or should become. Another example is Australia's and Britain's joint membership in the US-led military coalition that invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003. Opposition to that war existed in both countries, but while the British opposition typically asked: Why are we in that coalition, what are the dangers of going to war?" the Australian stance was "What does the willingness to act as America's deputy sheriff tell us about ourselves as a nation?"