

Andrew McGregor

Film Criticism as Cultural Fantasy

The Perpetual French Discovery
of Australian Cinema



Peter Lang

This book presents an unprecedented analysis of the dynamics of cultural representation and interpretation in film criticism. It examines how French critical reception of Australian cinema since the revival period of the 1970s has evolved as a narrative of perpetual discovery, and how a clear parallel can be drawn between French critics' reading of Australian film and their interpretation of an exotic Australian national identity. In French critical writing on Australian cinema, Australian identity is frequently defined in terms of extremes of cultural specificity and cultural anonymity. On the one hand, French critics construct a Euro-centric orientalist fantasy of Australia as not only a European Antipodes, but the antithesis of Europe. At the same time, French critics have tended to subordinate Australian cultural identity within the framework of a resented Anglo-American filmic and cultural hegemony. The book further explores this marginalisation by examining the influence of the French *auteur* paradigm, particularly in reference to the work of Jane Campion, as well as by discussing the increasingly problematic notion of national identity, and indeed national cinemas, within the universal framework of international film culture.

FILM CULTURES

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Film Criticism as Cultural Fantasy

FILM CULTURES

Vol. 2

Edited by
Andrew McGregor & Philippe Met



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

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Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche National-
bibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet
at <<http://dnb.d-nb.de>>.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:
A catalogue record for this book is available from *The British Library*,
Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McGregor, Andrew, 1971 June 13-
Film criticism as cultural fantasy : the perpetual French discovery of Australian
cinema / Andrew McGregor.
p. cm. - (Film cultures ; v. 2)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Includes filmography.
ISBN 978-3-0351-0031-0 (alk. paper)
1. Motion pictures, Australian-France. 2. Film criticism-France. 3. Motion
pictures-Australia-History-20th century. I. Title.
PN1993.5.A8M38 2010
791.430994-dc22

2010000352

Cover illustration: © by Denis Mareau

ISSN 1665-8972
ISBN 978-3-0351-0031-0

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info@peterlang.com, www.peterlang.com, www.peterlang.net

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Printed in Switzerland

This book is dedicated to my wife Vita
and to our son Alessandro

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Acknowledgements

This book is supported by a grant from the School of Languages and Linguistics and the Research and Research Training Committee, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne.

I offer my sincere thanks to Professor Colin Nettelbeck and to Dr Gregory Sims of The University of Melbourne for their advice and guidance while I conducted the PhD research from which this book is drawn. I am also grateful to Professor Jean A. Gili who supervised the development of this project during my DEA at the Université de Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne.

I am particularly indebted to M. Gilles Jacob, President of the Cannes International Film Festival, for his inestimable contribution to the research, and particularly for granting me a personal accreditation to attend the 52nd Cannes Film Festival.

Thanks also to the film professionals who gave generously of their time in contributing to the research: Pierre Rissient, Jean Roy, Pierre-Henri Deleau, Bernard Bories, Roger Gonin, Cathy Robinson, Diana Berman, Scott Murray and David Stratton.

I owe many thanks to Caroline Schopfer of Peter Lang in Bern for her invaluable support and for her professionalism in bringing this book to publication. I also thank the research staff at Screen Australia, at the Festival International du Film, and at the Bibliothèque du Film et de l'Image. While researching in Paris, I very much appreciated the advice of Mme Claudine Thoridnet and Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, and the generous friendship of Lionel Vuidard and Séverine Roinssard. Thanks also to Alice Burgin for her excellent research assistance.

I thank my wife Vita for her constant inspiration and for her extraordinary patience, and my parents for their unwavering support. To my closest friends James and Patrick Cannon, Nicholas Philippou, Simon and Christine Vanderkelen, I offer my sincerest gratitude for their exceptional friendship.

1. Cultural Fantasy

The Perpetual French Discovery of an Ever-Emerging *Cinema of the Antipodes*

The exoticism of the Antipodes has for centuries been a major focal point of European fantasy. French critical reception of Australian cinema, and French constructions of Australian cultural identity, reflect the enduring popular image in France of an Australia that is a cultural as well as a geographical opposite – an orientalist relationship that ensures European centrality as much as it perpetuates the marginalisation of Australian cultural identity. The theme of perpetual discovery that emerges in French critical writing on Australian film is indicative of a sustained cultural marginalisation as much as a practical and commercial marginality. Similarly, Australian as well as French organisations, in their attempt to create a niche market in France for what is labelled the *Cinema of the Antipodes*, perpetuate the notion that each and every identifiably Australian film offers the potential for a fresh European ‘discovery’ of the Antipodes.

For as long as French film criticism has maintained its international prestige via film journals of the calibre of *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*, French critical writing on film has itself been the object of analysis, and indeed criticism, from both within and beyond France.¹ This book seeks to demonstrate that with regard to particular national cinemas identified in France as obscure and far-flung – a status clearly attributed to the example of

1 See, for example, Pierre Ajame, *Les critiques de cinéma*, Paris: Flammarion, 1967; Michel Boujut, *La promenade du critique*, Lyon: Institut Lumière; Paris: Actes-Sud, 1996; Michel Ciment and Jacques Zimmer, eds, *La critique de cinéma en France*, Paris: Ramsay, 1997; Jean Collet, et al, *Lectures du film*, Paris: Editions Albatros, 1980; Louis Seguin, *Une critique dispersée*, Paris: UGE, 1976.

Australian national cinema examined here – the fundamentalism displayed by certain French film critics extends well beyond the realm of the aesthetic and the purely cinematographic, and into that of a particularly acute hegemonic cultural centrism.

French critical reception of Australian cinema since the revival period of the 1970s has evolved as a narrative of perpetual discovery of an ever-emerging and consistently marginalised Australian cultural identity. The objective of Australia's 'prestige' cinema was to produce a body of work – predominantly epic historical narratives and literary adaptations – that would come to represent, albeit problematically, a national and international 'monument' to Australian culture.² In line with this objective, a clear parallel can be drawn between French critics' reading of Australian film, and their interpretations of Australian national identity; however, in most cases, such interpretations have differed markedly from the objectives of cultural representation to which the Australian film industry has aspired over the decades since the early 1970s.

The theme of perpetual discovery plays out in two distinct perceptual frameworks. In French critical writing on Australian film, Australian identity is frequently defined in terms of extremes of cultural specificity and cultural anonymity. On the one hand, French critics identify Australia as an exotic and distant European Antipodes – an orientalist binary opposition whereby Australia is constructed as 'other', and the status of Europe is reinforced as 'centre'. An inadequate grasp of Australian cultural reference points led to a tendency to read the most contrived and caricatured filmic representations of Australia as realist or documentary filmmaking. A perpetually 'young' Australian cinema became a window through which French spectators could gaze upon a distant and unfamiliar antipodean landscape and draw conclusions about Australian identity.

On the other hand, French critics have tended to subordinate Australian cultural identity within the framework of a re-

2 Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, London; New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 35.

sented Anglo-American filmic and cultural hegemony. The familiarity of the classic generic structures that characterised the Australian filmmaking of the revival meant that many French critics saw sameness where Australian directors sought to show difference – a misperception indicative of a conflation of Australia's cultural identity with that of Britain and, particularly, America. Situated rather unsatisfactorily in between the perceived wholeness and distinctiveness of British and American cultural identity, Australia is often perceived as a comparatively illegitimate amalgam of both. Some French critics show a degree of condescension towards what they perceive as Australia's unfortunate status as either a colonial infant of Britain, or else as a starry-eyed admirer, even an imitator, of American culture. In either case, Australia is clearly placed in a context of perpetual subordination within Anglo-American culture, whereby French critics repeatedly identify Australia as a cultural anachronism: the new 'frontier', the new 'Far West', the new 'New World'.

This is not to suggest that the identification of Australia as an antipodean other is a uniquely French position. Britain also has traditionally referred to Australia and Australasia as 'the Antipodes', and even the familiar American term 'Down Under' places Australia in a framework of subordination to stronger political and cultural powers 'up on top' in the Northern Hemisphere. Nevertheless, the categorical exclusion of Australia from the Western World, as we shall see in the analysis that follows, is clearly indicative of the tendency of a number of French critics to read Australia not only as an exotic Antipodes, but as the *antithesis* of Europe.

The theme of the constant discovery and re-discovery of Australia's cinema, its landscape and culture, is perpetuated by practical considerations as much as by the less easily defined notion of perception of Australian cultural identity. The Australian film industry is indeed a relatively minor player in world film production and distribution. Besides the festival circuit, unless an Australian film is sold to a major French distributor (usually linked to a major Hollywood distribution network), its release in France is most likely to be restricted to a select few cinemas lo-

cated in central Paris. The relatively small number of Australian films released in France each year, compared to the number of French and Hollywood productions, also contributes to the image of Australian cinema as marginal, in practical as much as cultural terms.³ French criticism levelled at the Australian film industry ranges from the perceived copying of American genres, to the unjustifiable pursuit of commercial gain through the deliberate internationalisation of films for distribution overseas. In both cases, the Australian industry is seen as stepping outside its commercially and culturally marginal jurisdiction.

'Discovering' the cinema of the culturally marginal and geographically distant has long been a preoccupation of France's prestigious Cannes International Film Festival. An orientalist reading of the desire of the Cannes Film Festival's selection committee to be the first to discover increasingly obscure national cinemas is that it is in keeping with the colonialist and paternalistic French national self-image that has developed through France's historical interaction with distant lands identified as exotic or antipodean. While there is no suggestion here that France seeks to colonise the cinema of other nations, there is little doubt that the Cannes Film Festival is keen to uphold the status of France as a cultural 'centre' capable of unearthing the rare treasures to be found in the cinema of the 'other': in the case of Australia, this other is an opposite and necessarily inferior Antipodes – a culturally negative pole that perpetuates the positivity of Europe as the cultural and geographical standard.

A prime example of such Eurocentrism in French writing on Australian film is an article by Serge Grünberg entitled 'L'Australie: du désert à Hollywood' published in *Cahiers du*

3 In 2001, 40.7% of first-run feature films released in France were French, 31.4% were American, 6.5% were British and 1.4% were Australian. In 2007, 45.7% of first-run feature films released in France were French, 30.5% were American, 5.2% were British and 0.5% were Australian. Source: *Centre National de la Cinématographie*, 'Films en première exclusive selon leur nationalité', *Distribution*, 11 May 2009, p. 5.

cinéma in September 1994.⁴ Grünberg patronisingly credits Australia with ‘une farouche volonté de bien faire’⁵, which would appear to validate a popular perception held within Australia of an Australian cultural ‘cringe’ in the face of international scrutiny. This comes as little surprise considering the fact that Grünberg ponders: ‘[L]e drame de ce pays semi-désertique [...] n’est-il pas de ne pas posséder une «vraie» histoire?’⁶ The denial of a ‘real’ Australian history, which effectively negates any notion of an Australian national identity, is extended to Grünberg’s assessment of the value of Australian national cinema, which, he maintains, struggles to represent

[...] une culture appauvrie par l’endogamie monotone d’un *bush* ni vraiment civilisé ni vraiment sauvage et où, il faut bien le dire, il ne se passe absolument rien. Mais qu’est-il de plus difficile à montrer, cinématographiquement, que le *rien*?⁷

Amanda Macdonald has offered a detailed analysis of the cultural implications of the *Cahiers* article, in which she contends that Grünberg ‘participates in a long-standing French discursive habit of mythologising Australia as the vast desert island of the South Pacific.’⁸ In a separate discussion of the article, Stephen Crofts argues:

[Grünberg’s] strategy allows a European, and particularly Parisian, cultural condescension to ignore blithely empirical accuracy – cavalier ignorance and mistakes abound – in favour of pre-conceived notions. In an orientalist

4 Serge Grünberg, ‘L’Australie: du désert à Hollywood’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 483, September 1994, pp. 72–77.

5 Ibid., p. 72.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 74.

8 Amanda Macdonald, ‘French film-crit takes a holiday: *Les Cahiers* do desert-island discourse’, in Jane Warren, Colin Nettelbeck and Wallace Kirsop, eds, *A Century of Cinema: Australian and French Connections*, Melbourne: Department of French and Italian Studies, University of Melbourne, 1996, p. 60.

manner, these notions of Australia and its culture and cinema reciprocally construct Paris as centre of cultural activity, and Australia as void.⁹

This book is not intended to prescribe a 'correct' reading of the films that certain French critics somehow failed to interpret. Such an intention would suggest that the representation of a national cultural specificity in film is something other than the problematic concept that it is, despite the stated objective of the former Australian Film Commission being 'to enrich Australia's national identity'¹⁰. Reference made in this analysis to 'Australian national identity' is not intended to suggest the existence of an isolated and singular 'Australianness', neatly defined by binary oppositions between what is Australian and what is not. On the contrary, national identity is to be interpreted here as a complex construction of meaning made up of a multiplicity of cultural references and interpretations.

A theoretical concept that lends itself effectively to the interpretation of national identity as a non-binary, dynamic and organic body of meaning is the model of the 'rhizome' developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work *Mille Plateaux*¹¹. The theoretical construct of the rhizome is adapted from the physical characteristics of the rhizome, or bulb, of an iris – a root structure that develops in a multi-dimensional series of interconnected layers, rather than through the establishment of a hierarchy of binary oppositions around a central root or core. In the rhizome metaphor, 'territories' of meaning are constructed by a multiplicity of interconnecting lines rather than a series of fixed points. The layered, organic structure of the rhizome allows a cultural signifier to refer to a multiplicity of other territories of meaning simultaneously, through a con-

9 Stephen Crofts, 'International perceptions', in Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer, Ina Bertrand, eds, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 231.

10 Australian Film Commission, 'AFC Profile: About Us', at <http://www.afc.gov.au/profile/about_us/default.aspx>, article accessed 26 July 2006.

11 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris: Editions de minuit, 1980.

stant process of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. There is no fundamental 'core' or centre of meaning to be contrasted with a less authentic periphery – signifiers shift along 'lines of flight' that refer to a multiplicity of other territories within a fluid and constantly evolving global body of meaning. If we consider Australian national identity from such a perspective, we can not only account for the complexity of national identity as a construct, but also for the interconnectedness of that tacit 'whole' in relation to other equally interconnected national identities. National cultural identity is constructed as much from beyond as it is from within its perceived boundaries.

A practical model for the complexity of national identity is the international cinema industry. 'National' cinemas attempt to assert a cultural specificity within the 'universal' language of cinema. The cultural reference of a national cinema is organic in that it simultaneously represents and constructs national identity – a new Australian film will refer to previously existing notions of Australian national identity, and at the same time it modifies and extends the framework of interpretation of that identity, simply by adding to the corpus of both Australian and world cinema. At each stage in the generation of cultural and filmic reference, the convenient binary opposition implied by the 'label' of a particular national identity becomes increasingly problematic. Susan Hayward, in her work on French national cinema, maintains that the existence of the nation in terms of cultural identity, with its confused and blurred 'boundaries', is tantamount to *myth*: 'The national cinema is the mobiliser of the nation's myths and the myth of the nation.'¹²

National identity, because of its mirage-like nature when one attempts to distinguish its defining essence, is frustrating because it is a concept that holds great currency in the world. It is constantly reinforced by the application of blanket labels of nationality in the areas of politics and economics. Demonstra-

12 Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema*, London; New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 9.

tions of 'nationality-ism', if not nationalism, are also frequently encountered in sport, and all of these rarely challenged notions of a distinct national identity are perpetuated by the media – not least among these being film.

Thomas Elsaesser observes that “national cinema” makes sense only as a relation, not as an essence, being dependent on other kinds of film-making, to which it supplies the other side of the coin.¹³ Here we return to the notion that identity is generated through its relationship to other identities, in a global body of relativity or interconnectedness. Nationality establishes significance, or meaning, relative to other nationalities. When we analyse the term ‘national cinema’, the juxtaposition of the words ‘national’ and ‘cinema’ forms a relationship between *national* identity and *international* film culture, given that the medium of cinema transcends national boundaries. In an important sense, all films, in the context of the corpus of world cinema, are international products.

Tom O'Regan, in his 1996 book *Australian National Cinema*, talks of the necessary ‘internationalisation’ or ‘hybridisation’ of Australian films, as they form part of global film culture.¹⁴ The concept of intertextuality serves to remind us that no text comes from nowhere, and that each film, as text, refers to other films, if not *all* films. The same can be said for national identity, as a construction, and as a cultural text that inherently refers to other texts, or nationalities, otherwise we would not be able to recognise them, or interpret them, for what they are. The multiplicity of identities, connections, intersections, personal and collective experience, references and representations that make up the notion of national identity clearly transcends geographical boundaries.

Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, in their 1987 work *The Screening of Australia*, talk of this often-overlooked and occasionally deliberately ignored multiplicity in relation to Australian film:

13 Thomas Elsaesser, quoted in Tom O'Regan, op. cit., p. 48.

14 Tom O'Regan, op. cit., p. 49.

The more subtle, historically precise, politically challenging set of differences that intricately complicate the construction of Australian national identity – class, religion, locale, sub-culture, ethnic and racial separations, and sex and age – are too easily blurred into the mirage of national identity, for the sake of broad gestures of community and collectivity.¹⁵

Dermody and Jacka explain, quite usefully, the choice of the title of their work, *The Screening of Australia*, in the light of their acknowledgement of the inherent multiplicity of national identity. The word ‘screen’ refers not only to the medium in which Australia projects images of itself, but also to the concept of the screen as a veil, or filter, of the images that Australia *chooses* to project to itself, and to the world.¹⁶ Such a metaphor is particularly useful in the context of this analysis as it can be extended to incorporate the process of interpretation of that ‘filtered’ identity from an international perspective – from, as it were, the other side of the screen.

It is important to consider the interplay of a multiplicity of *both* internal and external intersections that construct the ‘territory’ of signification of Australian national identity. The use of such terms as ‘internal’ and ‘external’ is yet another example of a familiar tendency to create imagined cultural boundaries, or borders, around national identity, in much the same way that Benedict Anderson famously described nations themselves as ‘imagined communities’¹⁷. Upon further investigation, the passively adopted pre-conceived notion of a dichotomy, or binary opposition, between the culturally local and the culturally international, reveals itself to be unworkable. Frequently encountered labels of nationality such as ‘100% Australian’ (i.e. 0% recognition of, or slippage into, the international), are problematic on both a conceptual and a practical level. The aim here is not to deny the existence of the local, but rather to problematise the

15 Susan Dermody, Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a Film Industry*, Vol. 1, Sydney: Currency Press, 1987, p. 47.

16 *Ibid.*, p.18.

17 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, pp. 6-7.

application of binary oppositions to distinguish the local from the international.

In the context of the Australian film industry, the 'internationality' of national identity has manifested itself in the considerable degree of international participation within the industry, as well as in the constant flow of Australian film professionals working overseas. In most cases, 'overseas' can be read as 'Hollywood'. The almost systematic gravitation of talented Australian actors and directors towards Hollywood, often after achieving success with their first film, is the subject of much discussion in writing on Australian cinema. The expatriate Australian film director Fred Schepisi is among those who view this phenomenon as a natural progression from 'local' cinema into what Tom O'Regan describes as 'universal film'¹⁸. Schepisi maintains that universal film is 'part of us, it's just as much a part of us as being Australian. So it's not like we're going over and working in some strange area entirely.'¹⁹ Australian cinema, its film professionals, and indeed its film spectators, fit into the global territory of universal film, or international film culture; they are part of it, they are connected to it, and that connectedness is as much a part of 'Australianness' as that which is perceived to isolate Australian national identity from the rest of the world.

As already stated, the notion of connectedness, as opposed to isolation, is characterised by connecting lines rather than fixed points, implying ongoing changes in fields of meaning. In a textual or narrative sense, 'lines of flight' connect paradigms with a multiplicity of syntagmatic structures simultaneously. Whether we consider these lines of flight as the 'slipperiness', 'shifting', or 'blurring' of national cultural boundaries, these constructs, or in this case, national identities, are constantly being defined, challenged, undone, subverted and redefined in

18 Tom O'Regan, 'National cinema', Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer, Ina Bertrand, eds, op. cit., p. 347.

19 Fred Schepisi, quoted in Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, op. cit., p. 103.

relation to each other. In the context of Australian film, Dermody and Jacka problematise the issue of dichotomous distinctions of nationality in a manner consistent with the rhizome model:

[W]here do 'we' end and the 'other' begin? Who is the other by which we define our difference, ensuring 'us'? Britain? America? How are 'they' to be satisfactorily disentangled from what we have internalised and hybridised from them?²⁰

As this analysis of French critical writing on Australian film attests, French critics have demonstrated some difficulty in distilling an Australian cultural specificity from what they perceive more broadly as an Anglo-American cultural hegemony.

* * *

The entanglement of Australian national identity in other identities leads us to the problematic attribution of labels of national identity to films. Following the conventions of international film distribution, the assignment of nationality to a film is normally based on the criterion of economically acquired rights to that nationality. Given that nationality rights can effectively be 'bought' by any nation providing a large enough percentage of the production funding for a feature film, the conventional economic definition of nationality is clearly not congruent with the supposed role of national cinema as a cultural export emerging from, and representing, a national cultural identity.

To illustrate the complexity of the issue of national 'ownership' of films, we shall examine two examples of films that are problematic in terms of their particularly blurred cultural boundaries. Firstly, Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), financed by both Australia and France, and secondly, Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (1996) financed by 20th Century Fox. These are complex, and contested, examples of what

20 Susan Dermody, Elizabeth Jacka, op. cit., p. 20.

have been variably classified as Australian productions, as neither film features an Australian actor in a major role, and neither was shot in any Australian location. Yet, the Australian Film Institute (AFI) recognises *The Piano* as an Australian film, while at the 1997 AFI Awards, *Romeo+Juliet* was classified (controversially, according to many in the Australian industry) as 'foreign'. The December 1997 edition of the Australian film journal *Cinema Papers* featured an exposé that was critical of the AFI's classification of these two films.²¹ While *The Piano* was eligible as an Australian film as a co-production, despite being widely considered a New Zealand film, a comparison of the origin of the key technical and creative personnel working on the films suggests that *Romeo+Juliet* is by far the more Australian of the two productions, notwithstanding their obvious internationality. The personnel working on *Romeo+Juliet* that were of Australian nationality included such key players as the film's director, producer, scriptwriters, cinematographer, editor, art designer, sound designer, costume designer, and digital special effects technicians. Despite being received in most parts of the world as an American film, the nationality of Baz Luhrmann's production team and the extent of Australian creative input into the film warranted its classification as Australian in a number of places. In Paris, *Romeo+Juliet* was listed in *L'officiel des spectacles* as an Australian film.²² Not only does Deb Verhoeven's 1999 anthology of Australian and New Zealand cinema, *Twin Peeks*, credit Australia solely with the nationality of the film, it also features a still from the film on the cover, suggesting that *Romeo+Juliet*, despite being an international 'hybrid', is, in fact, one of Australia's iconic cinematic achievements.²³

The practical problems of identity facing the Australian film industry as a generator of national cultural exports are a mani-

21 '1997 AFI Awards: Spot the difference', *Cinema Papers*, no. 122, December 1997, p. 4.

22 *L'officiel des spectacles*, 21 October 1998, p.85.

23 Deb Verhoeven, ed., *Twin Peeks: Australian and New Zealand Feature Films*, Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 1999, p. 452.

festation of the blurred cultural 'boundaries' of national identity. For the purposes of this analysis, the composition of the corpus has been determined by the reception of each film in France as an Australian production. Cases where the reporting of a film's Australian nationality is inconsistent have also been included. This not only provides the broadest possible scope for the analysis, but also highlights the extent to which the problematic 'labelling' of national identity has influenced the French critical reception of Australian cinema.

* * *

In the absence of any documented history of Australian cinema in France, the composition of the corpus required research from a variety of primary sources. The Australian Film Commission provided the details of the Australian films screened at the Cannes Film Festival since its inception in 1946. This was compared to the official record of Australia's history at Cannes provided by Gilles Jacob, President of the Cannes International Film Festival, in an interview conducted in Paris in November 1998.

An accreditation to attend the 52nd Cannes International Film Festival in May 1999 allowed first-hand observation of the representation of the Australian film industry at Cannes. In addition to the anecdotal evidence obtained at the Festival, interviews were conducted in 1998 and 1999 with other key players in the Australian film industry's presence in France. These included Cathy Robinson (Chief Executive of the Australian Film Commission), Diana Berman (Director of Marketing of the Australian Film Commission), Pierre Rissient (Principal advisor on Australian cinema for the Cannes Film Festival Selection Committee), Pierre-Henri Deleau (*Délégué Général* of the *Quinzaine des réalisateurs*), Jean Roy (*Délégué Général* of the *Semaine internationale de la critique*, and film critic at *L'Humanité*), Jean Gili and Christian Viviani (Film critics and members of the editorial committee at *Positif* and *1895*), Bernard Bories (President of the *Association Cinéma des Antipodes* and Director of the Saint

Tropez *Festival du cinéma des Antipodes*), Roger Gonin (Co-director of the *Festival du court métrage de Clermont Ferrand*), Jean-Pierre Jeancolas (French film historian), Claudine Thoridnet (Organiser of the retrospective of Australian cinema at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1991 and editor of the accompanying book, *Le cinéma australien*²⁴), Scott Murray (Filmmaker and founding editor of *Cinema Papers*) and David Stratton (Film critic for *Variety*, *The Australian*, *The Movie Show* – SBS Television Australia and *At The Movies* – ABC Television Australia).

The primary research material used in this analysis of French critical writing on Australian cinema from 1971 to 2001 is, we believe, comprehensive. The material, consisting of published reviews of Australian films appearing in the French press and France's film journals, was obtained from a variety of sources in France and Australia. These include the research libraries of the *Centre National de la Cinématographie*, the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, the *Bibliothèque du Film et de l'Image*, and the *Bibliothèque André Malraux* in Paris. In Australia, primary research was conducted at the Australian Film Commission, the Australian Film Institute, Cinemedia, and the National Film and Sound Archive.

The order of analysis is chronological. This presentation has been chosen to ensure that the common themes that emerge from French critical responses to Australian films can be analysed in the order in which they became apparent, rather than through the imposition of a thematic or generic approach that could potentially distort the historical accumulation of filmic and cultural reference points used by the French critics. Such an approach also highlights the sense of 'discovery' of Australian cinema in France in the early 1970s, and the notion of the French critical reception of Australian cinema as an evolving critical narrative.

24 Claudine Thoridnet, ed., *Le cinéma australien*, Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1991.

2. In the Beginning

The Australian Cinema Industry from the *Cinématographe* to the Revival

It is indeed noteworthy, in the context of this analysis, that the history of Australian cinema began with the arrival in Australia of a Frenchman. In 1896, Marius Sestier, a friend of Auguste Lumière, first presented the Lumière brothers' dramatic new technological marvel, the *cinématographe*, in Sydney on 26 September 1896, and then in Melbourne on 4 November the same year.¹ Regardless of the debate surrounding the origins of the technology of cinema, given that there is general consensus that the invention of the *cinématographe* occurred around mid-1895, the rapidity of its export to Australia was remarkable.

Equally rapid was the deployment of the new technology in Australia. Film production began immediately after the arrival of the *cinématographe* in 1896. The first films to be produced consisted mainly of short, unedited documentary style footage of events and scenes such as the horse races in Melbourne, the ferry at Manly and the wharves in Brisbane.² These films were intended to demonstrate the novelty of moving images as a new technology. Right from the beginnings of the fledgling industry in Australia, some of these early films were exported to major cities and countries overseas, including Sestier's work, which, following the pattern the Lumière brothers imposed on their operators, was shipped back to France for local entertainment.

Perhaps the most significant milestone in the early days of Australian cinema was the production in 1906 of the film *The*

1 Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, 'Planet Lumière', Jane Warren, Colin Nettelbeck, Wallace Kirsop, eds, op. cit., p. 16.

2 Australian Film Commission, *Australian Film and Television: An Overview*, Sydney: AFC, 1998, p. 3.

Story of the Kelly Gang, directed by Charles Tait. The Australian Film Commission claims that *The Story of the Kelly Gang* 'is believed by many to be world's first full-length film.'³ Whatever the case, the subject matter of this first Australian feature-length film would become a hallmark of the feature films produced in Australia. The overt anti-authoritarian nature of *The Story of the Kelly Gang* is a common thread in Australian cinema. George Miller, in his retrospective for the British Film Institute entitled *White Fellas Dreaming: A Century of Australian Cinema*⁴ is straightforward in his appraisal of the appeal of such anti-authoritarian stories to what he judges to be a nation bred of convicts and their violent and oppressive British masters. This could explain the appeal to Australian audiences of the anti-Establishment, and more specifically, the anti-British stance taken in many Australian films, such as '*Breaker*' *Morant* (Bruce Beresford, 1980) and *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981), and also in the 'ocker' Australian comedies of the 1970s such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972).⁵ The figure of the lone rebel, epitomised by the popular legend of Charles Tait's protagonist, the Australian bushranger Ned Kelly, was later to be reinvented in George Miller's highly successful cult classic, *Mad Max* (1979). From the important beginning of *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, Australia went on to become the most significant source of film production during the period 1906 to 1911, when more feature films were produced in Australia than in any other country in the world.⁶

From 1906 to 1928, the Australian cinema industry produced a total of 150 feature films. Despite the wide variety of themes dealt with, many of them involved predominantly Australian subject matter, such as bushranging in *For the Term of His Natural*

3 Ibid.

4 George Miller, *White Fellas Dreaming: A Century of Australian Cinema*, British Film Institute, 1996.

5 Produced primarily for an Australian audience, none of the 'ocker' Australian comedies of the 1970s were released commercially in France.

6 Eric Reade, *Australian Silent Films: A Pictorial History of Silent Films From 1896-1929*, Melbourne: Landsdowne, 1970, p 34.

Life (Charles MacMahon, 1908), gold mining in *The Miner's Curse* (Alfred Rolfe, 1911), transportation of convicts in *The Mark of the Lash* (John Gavin, 1911), and horse racing in *Won on the Post* (Alfred Rolfe, 1912). At that stage, it appeared that Australian audiences were keen to see representations of themselves and the myths and legends of Australian culture portrayed on the big screen. Even today, the films that present the most idealised interpretation of the popular myth of the Australian rebel or pioneer (also referred to as the 'Great Aussie Battler') seem to best capture the imagination of Australian audiences. In *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), a typical 'battling' outer-suburban family takes on the system and wins, in a dispute over government acquisition of the family home. The underdog comes out triumphant, much like the commercial success in Australia of such a relatively cheap Australian film, despite the dominance of the American blockbuster in the Australian market.⁷

By 1928, however, the industry had begun to suffer the effects of the stranglehold placed upon it by the merger in 1913 of nearly all the major Australian film production, distribution and exhibition companies into the one body: *Australasian Films*. Instead of consolidating and boosting local feature film production, this 'combine' sought to limit its production by discouraging its own affiliates from making feature films, and refusing to distribute many films made by independent Australian producers.⁸ In a bid to relieve the pressure on the struggling Australian

7 67% of all films released in Australia from 1984 to 2001 were American, while 11% were Australian. Australian films earned 7.9% of the total Australian box-office during that period. *The Castle* earned over \$AUD 10 million at the Australian box office, and as at 21 January 2002 was placed 17th in the top 100 Australian films released in Australia. Source: Australian Film Commission, 'Numbers of Australian and overseas films released in Australian cinemas, 1984–2008', at <<http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/wcfilmxcountry.html>>; 'Australian films' share of the Australian box office, 1977–2008', at <<http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/mrboshare.html>>; 'Top Australian features at the Australian box office, 1966 to 2006', at <www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/pdfs/avprod_feats.pdf>. Articles consulted 8 November 2009.

8 Eric Reade, op. cit., p. 41.

film industry, various groups in the 1920s, most particularly the Motion Pictures Producers' Association, lobbied for an official inquiry. In 1928, the Commonwealth government established a Royal Commission to investigate the infrastructure and practices of the industry. The existing legislation relating to film censorship, taxation, import duties and film quotas was scrutinised in every detail; however, despite making fifty separate recommendations for improvement, the Commission failed to bring about effective legislative change.⁹

The failure of the Commonwealth government to free up the structure of Australia's film industry, together with the soaring film production costs associated with the introduction of sound technology in 1927, brought the Australian film industry to its knees. The final blow came in the form of the devastating world Depression, which led to the total collapse of the Australian feature film industry. During the forty years from 1928, only a handful of Australian feature films were made.

In the absence of a feature film industry, film production in Australia from the 1930s to the 1960s consisted mainly of newsreels, commercials and documentaries. There were, however, groups of independent filmmakers who still managed to produce a small number of feature films despite strong economic pressures. For instance, Lee Robinson and Chips Rafferty were able to make a number of feature films from 1952 to 1958. Perhaps the most significant contribution to the history of Australian feature filmmaking during this period was by Charles and Elsa Chauvel. In 1955, the Chauvels' *Jedda* was the first feature film to be produced in colour by an Australian company. It was also the first Australian feature to 'star' Australian Aborigines in leading roles. Most significantly for the purposes of this study, it was also the first Australian film to be selected for screening at the Cannes International Film Festival.

After the end of the Second World War, the attention of major film production companies in Britain and the USA was

9 Australian Film Commission, *Australian Film and Television: An Overview*, op. cit., p. 3.

drawn to Australia. The landscape of the country was seen as an 'exotic'¹⁰ location for the production of a number of British and American feature films. These companies cast Australians in supporting roles and occasionally used Australian personnel in non-principal technical positions. Once again, Australian audiences were keen to look at themselves, or at least their landscape, as depicted on the big screen, even if it took foreign investment and indeed foreign production companies to see the value in producing the films. Films such as *The Overlanders* (Harry Watt, 1946), *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959) and *The Sundowners* (Fred Zinnemann, 1960) were tremendously popular with audiences in Australia, acting as precursors to the success of other international (read: Hollywood) productions filmed in Australia. *The Matrix* (Larry & Andy Wachowski, 1999) and *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (George Lucas, 2002) are examples of major Hollywood productions filmed in Australia with the increasing involvement of Australian actors and technicians, but (understandably, given the science-fiction genre of the films in question) with every attempt made to avoid the possible interpretation of any Australian cultural specificity in the films. The practical as well as cultural consequences of the growing number of Hollywood productions filmed in an increasingly (and deliberately) unidentifiable Australia are discussed later in this book.

In the 1960s, in the context of the enormous social and cultural change of the times, the seeds were sown for the revival of the Australian film industry. Not content with leaving the production of feature films in Australia to foreign interests, arts groups began extensive lobbying of the Federal Government for increased support for the arts in general, and particularly for much needed investment in the long dormant Australian feature film industry. This led to the creation in 1968 of the Australian Council for the Arts and the Australian Film Development Corporation, which was reconfigured in 1975 and renamed as

10 Ibid.

the Australian Film Commission (AFC).¹¹ In 2008, the AFC was again reconfigured and renamed Screen Australia. The widespread rejection of the status quo and, more specifically, the calling into question of existing structures and authority, led to the emergence of an Australia which was beginning to develop a different sense of national identity, and a desire to distinguish itself from its British heritage. Australians wanted to develop their own forms of cultural representation, and to make their own mark in the world.

11 Ben Goldsmith, 'Cultural Policy', Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer, Ina Bertrand, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 94.