

# ALTERNATIVE SPACES: INDIGENOUS FILMS

BY ANDREW ZIELINSKI

*This is the fourth instalment in a series for Screen Education in which Andrew Zielinski outlines the work he developed for his Cinema Studies course on Australian National Cinema at Flinders University, South Australia. It is hoped that teachers will be able to extract valuable information and lesson ideas from this series, in order to introduce students to Australian National Cinema in the secondary classroom. This section features the topic 'Indigenous Films'.*

**A** boriginal representation in Australian feature films has two hallmarks: the fact that relatively few films about them have been produced (and those that have been were made almost exclusively by whites) and the paucity of films portraying a genuine understanding of the culture. Feature film has rarely shown the positive Indigenous experience; it has mainly been a cinema of oppositional cultures in a post-colonial context. The alternative cinema of short film and documentary has redressed much of this imbalance, though usually to a small audience. In these films, the search for an understanding of Indigenous culture provides some relevant counterpoints to the concerns of the feature films.

The Aboriginal attitude towards the land is a significant part of their beliefs. Their legends and myths come from over 40,000 years of history. The bulk of feature films about Aboriginals concentrate on the collision with Europeans and this becomes a post-colonial cinema of aggression, misunderstanding and power exercised by whites. This work examines this unhappy feature film experience with specific reference to *Jedda* (Charles Chauvel, 1955), and contrasts it with *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998). *Jedda* was Australia's first colour film and one of the five films chosen to represent the nation's centenary of cinema, while

*Radiance* represents an alternative viewpoint to the dominant one.

Only through five films since 1999 has there been a semblance of a cultural change in the representation of Indigenous issues. These films – *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002), *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002) and *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2006) – have interrupted the linear accumulation of the negative history of Australian Indigenous feature films. (*Ten Canoes* will be analysed in the next issue of *Screen Education*.)

## REPRESENTING ABORIGINALITY

A prevailing theme is the problem of Indigenous representation, in particular defining 'Aboriginality'. As Marcia Langton notes, most of the films (shorts, documentaries and features) 'are diminished to the size of a family of ants in comparison to the elephant of colonial representation'.<sup>1</sup> According to Langton, a function of this representation is to make the Indigenous 'invisible' to the growing white culture.

Apart from Tracey Moffatt (who has made several distinctive short films, such as *Nice Coloured Girls* [1987] and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* [1989], and a feature, *beDevil* [1993], all three addressing Indigenous issues)

and Rachel Perkins' first feature *Radiance*, there has been precious little involvement of Aboriginal filmmakers in film production. While there are changes occurring, the feature film sector is having difficulties filling the roles in distribution, marketing and co-productions with people from Indigenous backgrounds. The Australian Film Commission's Indigenous Branch plays a role in facilitating the participation of Indigenous filmmakers from script to postproduction.

## INDIGENOUS CINEMA AS A POST-COLONIAL EXPRESSION

The films produced in the context of an Australian post-colonial cinema carry several codes of representation:

- as primitive or savage with a lure of the exotic or primitive 'other'
- located between individual and state with the disturbing history of removal, genocide, denial and dispossession
- as a consequence of defining 'aboriginal' (there are sixty-seven definitions of the label) in Anglo-Australian legal and administrative contracts. underlining the obsession or fixation with attempting to secure the race
- as a consequence of attempting to understand Aboriginality through assimilation, which automatically invests the issue as a dilemma or a 'failure'.



*Chauvel's views are centred on a utopian cultural assimilation based on intermarriage.*

## FILMS

### JEDDA

Charles Chauvel, 1955

#### Cast:

Ngaria Kunothe – Jedda  
Robert Tudawali – Marbuck  
Betty Suttor – Sarah McMann  
Paul Reynall – Joe  
George Simpson-Lyttle – Douglas McMann

Young Aboriginal girl Jedda is adopted by a white couple who live on a lonely cattle-breeding station. She is brought up 'white' but is attracted to the rituals of Aboriginal people. She is meant to marry Joe, a 'half breed' groomed to be the station owner, but the arrival of Marbuck, a full blood Aboriginal outcast, dramatically alters the status quo.

Pre-release publicity, especially in women's magazines, emphasized the melodrama. Other marketing noted that

this was a film only Australia could produce and that it could in fact restore local film production.

The shoot overcame the obstacles of extreme locations and weather problems. Shooting occurred between July and September 1953, while retakes of the interiors, mixing, processing took place in London during 1954. The cost and time involved contributed to the view that the film was an epic, with untried Gevacolor causing exposure problems. The other major gamble was the possibility, ignored by Chauvel, that race relations were box office poison.

*Jedda* made an attempt to portray Aboriginal customs with some fidelity. It included music by Isador Goodman, who based his score on Aboriginal music. Advice was sought on correct Aboriginal custom, gesture and decoration, although there are some stylistic aberrations between the interior design and lighting compared to the exteriors. Stuart Cunningham suggests

in *Featuring Australia* that *Jedda* was a 'triumph of locations and casting'. The film is a serious engagement with landscape and cultural (Aboriginal) definition, while responses to it ranged from a view that it instilled racial pride to a claim that it was 'peddling the worst kind of racist nonsense'. For example, following *Jedda's* appearance at the Cannes Film Festival (the first Australian film to be invited) *Cahiers du cinéma* noted 'the incredible puerility of the situations, dialogue and the truly prodigious hideousness of the colour'.

### Interpreting *Jedda*

The film can be considered doco-drama, melodrama, arthouse or social commentary, as well as offbeat and over-ambitious. It could even be considered a case of 'landscape as entertainment'. Cunningham sees this as the high point of Chauvel's 'mastery of style' – melodrama as reflected in the geographic locations of gorges, cliffs and landscape. (This was his last film; he made it at age sixty-two.)

Chauvel's views are centred on a utopian cultural assimilation based on intermarriage. There are three representations of Aboriginality in the film: Marbuck as untainted tribal culture; Joe as the assimilated half caste; and



TOP: BEHIND THE SCENES OF *JEDDA*  
ABOVE: PUBLICITY FOR *JEDDA*  
OPP. PAGE: *RADIANCE*



*The film is a serious engagement with landscape and cultural (Aboriginal) definition, while responses to it ranged from a view that it instilled racial pride to a claim that it was 'peddling the worst kind of racist nonsense'.*

Jedda's failure to be assimilated without consent.

Cunningham comments that *Jedda* is a family melodrama in style and narrative. Sarah, the station owner's wife, is portrayed as the typical hysteric, whose desire to assimilate Jedda derives directly from the loss of her child. Station owner Doug substitutes his sexual desire with a need to have Joe take over the station. His senses of order and his place as patriarch are challenged by the sexuality and cultural purity of Marbuck. Jedda and Marbuck are the stylistic embodiment of the film's social themes as they draw on heightened melodrama and powerful sexual presence. This was not a film made to comply with the ideas of Australian audiences in the 1950s.

The second half of the film is a chase narrative, framed by the scenic grandeur of the Northern Territory. Grand passions and emotions are played out within the geographic spectacle. The characters are more than figures in the landscape – the internal workings of atmosphere, character motivation, tension and resolution are merged with the exteriors.

An alternative view has been proposed by Colin Johnson, who sees *Jedda* 'as Tarzan in black face'. According to Johnson:

*[There is an] Aboriginal reading which reveals that we are not dealing with a true account of what happens to Aborigines when they come in contact and conflict with civilisation, but with a central problem of Aboriginal society. This is the stealing of women, the social problem of wrongway relationships, and the reaction of Aboriginal society. Moreover another problem is dealt with: the fear/attraction of Mission-educated Aboriginal women when confronted by their Aboriginality in the form of an Aboriginal male, who is not the stumbling drunk the street derides, but one in full control of his being.*<sup>2</sup>

In Johnson's view, Chauvel ideologically constructs Aboriginality from his own position. The 'noble savage' as embodied by Marbuck is represented as dream/desire for Jedda.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting that *Jedda* is mostly regarded as a failure when included in conferences on Indigenous issues. The

position put forward is not that Chauvel failed to address European understanding of the Aboriginal question, but that the film failed to understand and offer sufficient access to the complexities of Indigenous issues.

### **RADIANCE**

Rachel Perkins, 1998

#### **Cast:**

Deborah Mailman – Nona  
Trisha Morton-Thomas – Mae  
Rachel Maza – Cressy

In *Radiance*, a mother's death reunites three Aboriginal daughters at their childhood home. The film was Indigenous filmmaker Rachel Perkins' first feature film and was nominated for Best Feature by the AFI in 1998. The three half-sisters are forced to confront their mother's legacy of half-truths, family secrets and unfinished business. This tale of family intrigue is very much closer to a universal sensibility than a specifically indigenous one, and in this way breaks new ground in this genre. Developed from a play by Louis Nowra, the style of



the drama-piece, convention of a single setting and talented ensemble cast give a newer sensibility to Indigenous cinema. *Radiance* is not so much about Aboriginality but womanhood. This is a domestic drama written for an Aboriginal cast subverting the expectations of class oppression, trauma, power and colonization. In the original play, Nowra deliberately deflected any potential intervention into expected race tensions.

### **RABBIT-PROOF FENCE**

Phillip Noyce, 2000

#### **Cast:**

Everlyn Sampi – Molly Craig  
Tianna Sansbury – Daisy Kadibill  
Laura Monaghan – Gracie Fields  
David Gulpilil – Moodoo  
Kenneth Branagh – A.O. Neville

### **THE TRACKER**

Rolf de Heer, 2002

#### **Cast:**

David Gulpilil – The Tracker  
Gary Sweet – The Fanatic

### **BENEATH CLOUDS**

Ivan Sen, 2003

#### **Cast:**

Damian Pitt – Vaughn  
Danielle Hall – Lena

These three films represent a significant shift in the narration and stylistic presentation of Indigenous films in Australia. They represent box office and critical support with AFI awards for the films, and their directors and stars. Taken in totality, the three films offer significant access points for the analysis of Indigenous feature films in Australia. Each film has significant merits over a spread of direction, writing, stylistic representations and narrative aspects.

### **TEXTS**

S. Cunningham, *Featuring Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991.  
M. Walsh, 'Beneath Clouds', *StoryLine*, Autumn 2003.  
D. Varga, 'Interview with Rolf de Heer', *StoryLine*, Summer 2002/3.  
A. Martin, 'Bouquet of Barb Wire', *Sight & Sound*, November 2002.

### **ACTIVITIES**

1. What films have you seen with Australian Aboriginals represented? Look at major roles and supporting casts.
2. Discuss the characters' positioning in the narrative.
3. What do we mean by 'post-colonial cinema'? Comment on a film or two that offers some depth and which brings some ambiguity to the term.
4. Provide a comment on the 'claiming of the real' of documentaries as opposed to the dramatic and contrived features in Indigenous cinema.



ABOVE: *RABBIT-PROOF FENCE*

## JEDDA

1. Discuss the acting/role/meaning and impact of Marbuck.
2. Looking back from 2008, what do you think Chauvel was trying to achieve almost sixty years ago?
3. What places the chase sequence in the second part of the film above being simply a travelogue?
4. Comment on the closure (necessary, overly dramatic, neat, the only resolution within the melodramatic structure).
5. Compare *Jedda* to *Radiance*.



## RABBIT-PROOF FENCE

1. Comment on the aspects of the extraordinary journey pursued by the girls.
2. Discuss the film as an emblem of the Australian reconciliation movement.
3. What represents the film falling into the battling oppositional narrative?
4. Comment on the music score (by Peter Gabriel) and the choices made by the cinematographer (Christopher Doyle).
5. How does the emotionally charged conclusion affect you?
6. Comment on the role of A.O. Neville (Branagh) in the film.

## THE TRACKER

1. Comment on some of the more unusual aspects of *The Tracker*, such as Archie Roach's music and lyrics and the inserts of Peter Coad's paintings.
2. Discuss the apparent simplicity of the narrative and how the film manages to create a strong historical sense and emotional impact.
3. Compare David Gulpulil's performances in *Walkabout*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Tracker*.
4. Make some comment about the impact of this fundamentally white story about what was done to black people.

## BENEATH CLOUDS

1. Analyse the film's powerful emotional climax.
2. The film has a very distinctive form of landscape composition using a wide angle lens and low camera positions juxtaposed with telephoto lenses to compress distances. Deconstruct these stylistic uses and impact.
3. Discuss the film's use of immediate situations rather than complicated narrative.
4. How do the two actors engage you emotionally?
5. Comment on the debate of racial pain and individual pursuits.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Marcia Langton, *Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television: an Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993, p.42.
- <sup>2</sup> Colin Johnson, 'Chauvel and the Centring of the Aboriginal Male in Australian Film', *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, <<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/1.1/Johnson.html>>, accessed 14 February 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*



TOP: RABBIT-PROOF FENCE  
ABOVE: THE TRACKER

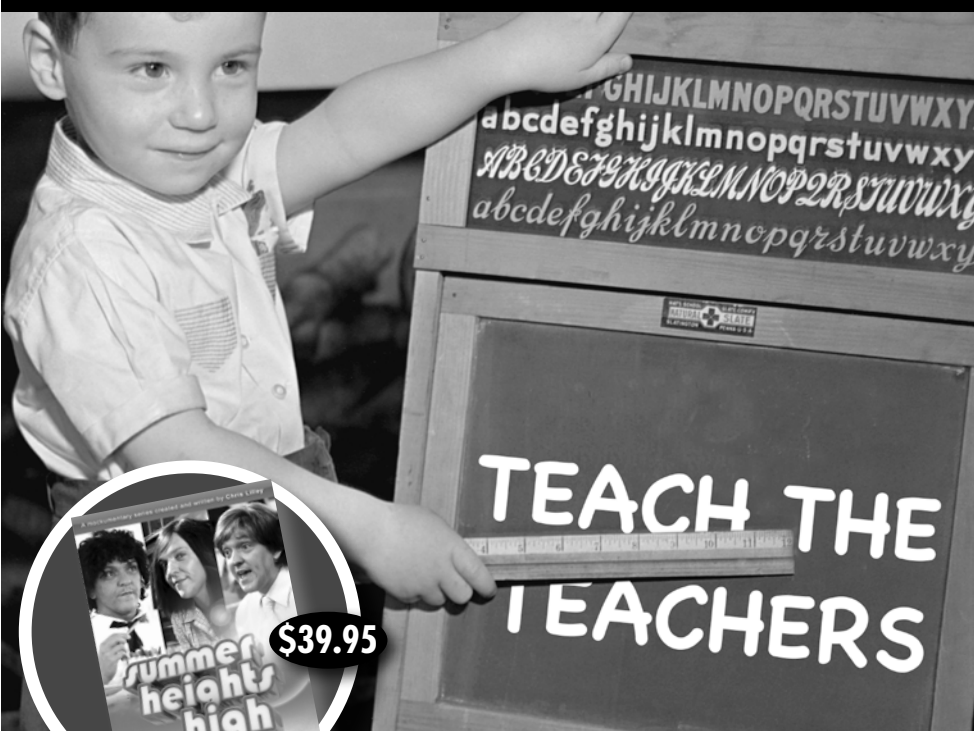
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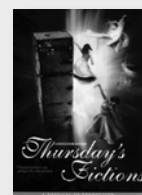
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