

“All we see and all we seem...” – Australian Cinema and National Landscape

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Note: The paper as envisioned in this abstract may prove too large in scope to fit within the parameters of the symposium. If this is the case, I propose not to explore those films I have called “transitional” in detail, but to allude to them as significant texts that can be explored elsewhere. The central argument I am making in this paper is that Australian filmmakers’ uses of “landscape” have changed significantly since the mid-1970s, and that this change can be meaningfully described by looking at what characterised 1970s Australian films’ depictions of landscape and contrasting that with current stylistic trends.

In this paper I will argue that Australian feature filmmakers’ uses and depictions of “the Australian landscape” in their cinema have undergone a striking and important transformation since the 1970s, and that this transformation, while reflecting a developing and modulating sense of Australian cultural identity, has also been crucially linked with changes and developments in the Australian film industry itself, changes which relate to Government investment initiatives, increasingly complex production and co-production strategies, and, more recently, off-shore production by major Hollywood studios.

During the 1970s, following the confluence of numerous different factors, there was an extraordinary revival of Australian film. The graduation of the first group of students from the newly-created Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), was one factor; students like Gillian Armstrong and Philip Noyce left their studies and began to work in the industry, and settled alongside filmmakers like Fred Schepisi, Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir, who had entered the industry in other ways. The other factors ushering in the revival are also significant: in 1970, Philip Adams and Barry Jones (working with the blessing of then Australian Prime Minister Gorton) travelled around the world researching Government-funded film industries, with the brief to prepare a detailed report recommending ways in which an Australian Film Industry might be literally “established”. After much wrangling and two changes of Prime Minister, the new Australian film industry was brought into being.

By 1975, the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC) had been founded, the South Australian Film Corporation had been established, the AFTRS had its first intake and the Australian Film Commission had been brought into being. All of these industrial bodies and educational organizations had one purpose: to bring into being a viable, internationally recognisable, and hopefully profitable Australian Film industry. It worked.

Finding, thus, by the mid-seventies, that they were able to access funding for feature film projects and participate in a reinvigorated industry, the group of filmmakers listed above came to define, through their films of the 1970s, a cinematic movement that was quickly dubbed the “Australian New Wave”. This movement, or group of films and filmmakers, redefined Australian cinema during the 1970s, and ushered in a new critical appraisal of Australian filmmaking. Crucial in all of this was the filmmakers’ uses of the Australian landscape.

As Tom O'Regan has pointed out in his "A Medium-Sized English-Language Cinema", for numerous reasons, Australia's film industry is a comparatively small one.¹ Medium-sized it may be in comparison with, say, the British film industry; but when viewed alongside Hollywood's monolithic studios and financial structures, the Australian film industry is very small indeed. Reduced size means a number of things for an industry whose objects of output are typically expensive to produce: there will be less of them made for each production period, or they will be made to cost less per unit to produce. Both of these measures have been at play in the Australian film industry since the 1970s; our country's film output per year has been notably smaller per capita than has America's, and our films' budgets have been miniscule in comparison. The latter issue is the one that most affected the emerging filmmakers of the Australian New Wave, and it is the one that most directly relates to the uses to which they would put the natural environment in their filmmaking.

Much of what was considered remarkable about the Australian New Wave was its filmmakers' uses of the Australian natural landscape. In films like Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) and Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* (1979), the natural environment featured prominently as a backdrop to narrative action and, in many cases, as a "character" or narrative presence of great importance. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, to cite the most important example, is a film whose visual compositions, incorporating the almost constant pictorial and symbolic presence of the rugged natural environment (specifically the Hanging Rock of the title) could only have been enabled through location shooting. Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, based on Thomas Keneally's important Australian novel, used locations in the Australian outback in similarly striking ways, expressing complex types of alienation and identification through its visuals. In this film, and in others like it, ideas about Australian cultural identity, racism, education, History and urbanisation are all played out through a complex visual use of the natural landscape.

Crucial when considering Australian filmmakers' uses of their country's landscape is the fact that location shooting, while utilising the extant features of any environment, also typically reduces costs for filmmakers; fewer sets have to be built (often cutting budgetary outlay enormously) and lighting setups are often more restricted (lessening the costs associated with cinematography). These reasons were factors for the Australian New Wave directors in particular. Working on "freshman" projects as they were, and using what was in essence a newly created production infrastructure, the New Wave directors had to operate with very tight purse strings. (Weir's 1973 debut *The Cars That Ate Paris* had a total budget, advertising included, of A\$269,000; *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, released two years later, was made for a total of A\$443,000.) Furthermore, without large film-production studios or purpose-built soundstages (resources that Hollywood filmmakers had been able to take advantage of since the 1920s) creative approaches to location shooting were often necessities.

Thus the filmmakers of the Australian New Wave responded to their particular industrial conditions by making canny use of the vast and varied visuals the Australian landscape presented them with. This trend, or production technique, continued for a number of years, through other projects like Henri Safran's *Storm Boy* (memorably shot at the Coorong) and Beresford's *Breaker Morant*, (set in South Africa and shot around Burra). During this period Australian filmmakers' uses of

¹ See Tom O'Regan, "A Medium-Sized English-Language Cinema" in *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 98-125.

location photography demonstrated that they were able to turn their financial and infrastructural constraints into strengths. Writing about Beresford's *The Getting of Wisdom* in the *Canberra Times* in 1977, for example, a critic wrote: "It looks beautiful. To say so about any Australian film nowadays borders on the superfluous..."² It is also arguable that the extraordinary reputations of many of Australia's cinematographers (people like Don McAlpine, John Seale, Mandy Walker and Dean Semler) are due largely to the fact that their abilities as technicians have been nurtured or shaped by the striking and challenging natural vistas they have had to photograph.

Since the late 1970s, conditions in the Australian film industry have been changing, and with that change one can also chart changes in Australian filmmakers' uses of the landscape. With the first two *Mad Max* films (released in 1979 and 1981 respectively) overseas audiences' perception of the Australian landscape was made to change violently. David Egby's and Dean Semler's widescreen cinematography was used to turn deserted highwayscapes into post-apocalyptic vistas of profound dread and alienation. The films became enormously successful in America in particular, and helped usher in a new period of Australian filmmaking. The use of what were previously regarded as Hollywood genre trappings (of the thriller and the action film, for example), and the juxtaposition of this genre machinery with the eerie depiction of space on screen proved fascinating and influential. I argue that this kind of Australian film, combined with the subsequent changes to Australian film industry investment incentives in the 1980s, brought about a series of "transitional" Australian film texts in which the uses and depictions of the national landscape changed significantly, and heralded a move from rural settings and period films to urban and built environments and contemporary narratives.

Much more recently, in films like Alan White's *Risk* (2000) and Jonathan Teplitzky's *Gettin' Square* (2003) we are seeing a new use of Australian landscapes in the cinema. *Risk*, utilising claustrophobic built environments in which to play out its *film noir*-ish narrative, relates visually to the kinds of Hollywood productions that have recently been shot in Australia (the *Matrix* trilogy, for example). The sophisticated studio facilities that have recently been built in Sydney, Melbourne and on the Gold Coast have been part of this change also; partly built in order to lure overseas film production to Australia, the studio facilities have removed the "tyranny of distance" for Australian filmmakers keen to shoot on elaborate sets or soundstages, and have made city-based production (with its proximity to editing, special effects, and other post-production facilities) more attractive and viable. Thus films like *Gettin' Square*, shot on the Gold Coast, utilises a Jeffrey Smart-inspired visual approach to tell its city crime-caper story, and the dislocation felt by many of the film's characters is echoed in the soulless steel and plexiglass landscape that urban Queensland provided for the filmmakers.

By charting the changes in Australian filmmakers' uses of Australian landscapes from the 1970s through to today, I argue that we can discern a complex interaction of funding and investment schemes, industrial infrastructures, and artistic trends, all working alongside a changing Australian landscape and population distribution. This complex change is being played out through the creation of cinematic texts that come in many ways to present Australia and its filmmakers to the rest of the world. The "modernisation" of the Australian film industry occurred in the

² Donald McDougal, quoted in David Stratton, *The Last New Wave* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Publishers, 1980), p. 51.

early 1970s; the post-modernisation (and urbanisation) of that industry is occurring now. What this might mean for the future of filmmaking in this country is interesting to consider, and this is a question I will return to throughout the paper; the other issue this crucially relates to is the way in which Australians see themselves in relation to “an Australian landscape”, and how this self-perception is voiced cinematically.

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