

Screening Indigenous Australia: an overview of Aboriginal representation on film

By Peter Krausz

LEARNING AREAS: Indigenous Studies, Media Studies, Society and Culture

EDUCATION LEVEL: 7-12, Uni/TAFE

In surveying Australian feature film production over the last 100 years, what clearly emerges is a general avoidance of Aboriginal issues and a lack of any balanced representation of Australia's significant Indigenous population; at least that was the case until recently. Over 1,000 feature films have been produced in Australia, yet I could only identify around fifty films that represent Aborigines in any way at all within the narrative. I need to add, before I present this brief overview, that things are changing, with a number of more recent films seeking to redress this imbalance and provide substantial Indigenous storylines. However when we look at the New Zealand film industry, with a number of its most successful films specifically addressing Maori culture and politics—such as *Whale Rider* and *Once Were Warriors*—it would seem important to ask the question, when will the Australian film industry explore Indigenous issues in more depth and with greater cultural resonance?

Up until the 1930s Australia's silent cinema tended towards representing Aborigines, when they were represented at all, as the evil hordes stalling white Australia's attempts to colonise the country. To some extent this representation is similar to the treatment of Native Americans in Hollywood silent cinema. Some prime examples of Indigenous characters in Australian films can be seen in some of the early Ned Kelly films, where they are seen as either embodiments of fun, or as menacing types in the background. This culminated in two films: *Uncivilised* (1936), Charles Chauvel's drama of an upper class woman kidnapped by a white man and his attendant Aborigines; and the unintentionally hilarious *A Nation is Built* (1938), directed by Frank Hurley, which dramatized the European colonization of Australia and celebrated 150 years of white settlement. The depiction of hostile and ignorant Aborigines in this film has to be seen to be (dis)believed and does nothing to further anyone's understanding of this critical time in Australia's history.

Moving forward to the 1950s, Chips Rafferty starred in two reasonable dramas: *Bitter Springs* (Ralph Smart, 1950), which is about a family battling against an Aboriginal tribe over a water-hole (featuring Charles (Bud) Tingwell) with, of course, the Aborigines coming off second best; and *The Phantom Stockman* (Lee Robinson, 1953) which Rafferty also co-produced, and which was an Australian

'Western' set in Alice Springs. Britain's Monthly Film Bulletin said this about the film:

The Australian backgrounds and idiom and the glimpses of the aborigines [one scene introduces, somewhat irrelevantly, the painter, Albert Namatjira, in his only feature film appearance] prove the film's most attractive and interesting features.

However the period of the 1950s is notable for Chauvel's *Jedda*, a somewhat sympathetic film about an Aboriginal girl raised by a white family who in turn is kidnapped by one of her own people, leading to a struggle between her heritage and the white values to which she has been exposed. Clearly, the message is that Australia's integration policy works to the detriment of Aboriginal culture and heritage. This was the first feature film that centred on being Aboriginal in Australia; it was the first film to be shot in colour, and was the first Australian film invited to Cannes.

The final nail in the coffin of 1950s film-makers' attempts to make an Aboriginal-themed film can be found in the Chips Rafferty-produced drama, *Dust in the Sun* (Lee Robinson, 1958), which dealt with a Northern Territory police officer taking an Aboriginal prisoner to a murder trial. The police officer is attacked by the prisoner's tribe in this curious tale, which is redolent with mixed messages and based on the novel *Justin Bayard* by Jon Cleary. The film, which was released two years after it was completed, proved to be a commercial disaster.

In 1967 it was mainly US money that was used to fund first time director James Trainor's adaptation of a Howard Koch script, about a white police officer escorting an Aboriginal killer back to white man's justice. *Journey Out of Darkness* has a plot reminiscent of *Dust in the Sun*, but is also saddled with a title that betrays the film's view of being Aboriginal. If that wasn't bad enough, white actor Ed Devereaux (what's that Skippy?) blacked up for the role of an Aboriginal tracker and Sri Lankan-born singer Kamahl (why are film critics so unkind?) played the role of the Aboriginal killer.

The emergence of the Australian film industry in the 1970s resulted in more challenging films being produced, some with an Aboriginal theme. *Walkabout* (1971), shot in 1969 with American backing and directed by Nicholas Roeg, empathetically presented an Aboriginal guide, David Gulpilil, as he led two children out of the desert following the children's father's death. The film, as to be expected from this creative director, traversed symbolic territory and garnered popular acclaim, mostly at film festivals.

Nigel Buesst's docu-drama, *Come Out Fighting* (1973), about the life of an Aboriginal boxer, was refreshing in its non-judgemental approach to the subject matter. Tim Burstall's *Eliza Fraser* (1976) was an amusing tale, similar to *Moll Flanders*, set in the nineteenth century and about a shipwrecked, lustful Englishwoman (Susannah York) who encounters a friendly group of Aborigines. The film is also memorable for Noel Ferrier's scenery chewing performance.

Storm Boy (1976) was a delightful children's tale shot in South Australia and directed by Henri Safran, about a young boy's friendship with an Aboriginal boy. This film achieved a great deal in mainstreaming Indigenous representation and it helped to make David Gulpilil a popular Australian actor. The film also won the AFI Award for best film.

Philip Noyce's *Backroads* (1977) is an edgy thriller about a pair of thieves, one Aboriginal and the other white, that demonstrated forcefully that feature films had started to mainstream Indigenous people. Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977) was a similarly edgy thriller featuring David Gulpilil, and is a richly woven text highlighting the clash between white and black Australia. It was, however, Fred Schepisi's *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) which brought the clash between Indigenous and white culture to the fore, in an angry film that caused audience debate about endemic Australian racial attitudes; this was similar to some of the arguments raised by the more recent release of *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002).

In the 1980s more film-makers brought Indigenous characters and actors into the storyline. *Manganinnie* (John Honey, 1980) was an obtuse but important film about the 1830s Aboriginal massacres in Tasmania. This history is embodied by one survivor, with reconciliation playing at the heart of the narrative. *Wrong Side of the Road* (Ned Lander, 1981) was a dramatised documentary of two Aboriginal rock bands, while *We of the Never Never* (Igor Auzins, 1982) continued the theme of reconciliation, as a white woman landowner attempts to survive the harsh Australian outback with the aid of a tribe of Aboriginies.

Werner Herzog revisited the culture clash in *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984), as the local Aborigines battle uranium testing, while Tim Burstall's *The Naked Country* (1984)—based on a Morris West novel—harked back to some of the land battles between white land-owners and the local Aborigines of the 1950s, and is clearly symbolic of present day struggles.

Aboriginal-themed films became more prominent during the 1980s, as evidenced by *Short Changed* (George Ogilvie, 1985), the sympathetic tale of the difficult relationship between an Aboriginal man and his white wife. Bill Bennett's *Backlash* (1986) divided audiences in its salutary story of an Aboriginal woman arrested for murder and her journey back to the scene of the crime. *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986) was Bruce Beresford's mainstream story of an Aboriginal family which moves into a white middle-class suburb. The representation of the underlying cultural differences and attempts at reconciliation are both moving and overly sentimental, yet this was a genuine look at a potentially united Australian society. Rarely seen, *The Dark Age* (Arch Nicholson, 1987) is a genre piece modelled on *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1976), but overlaid with an Aboriginal theme. Based on Graham Webb's novel *Numunwari* it is better, perhaps, if this film remains forgotten. *Kadaicha* (James Bogle, 1988) is another genre piece, this time based on *Poltergeist* (Hooper/Spielberg, 1982), that deals with an Aboriginal legend that invokes a series of deaths. The ambivalence of the treatment of Aboriginal themes is also seen in *The Dreaming* (Mario Andreacchio, 1988), as an Aboriginal woman transfers some disturbing visions to a doctor after she is shot. The use of Aboriginal myths and legends to further stories of violence and fear is highly problematic and undermines much of the attempts at representation of Indigenous Australia as the 1980s closed.

A clear change in this picture can be seen in the 1990s, as Wim Wenders epic *Until the End of the World* (1991) culminated in Australia's outback, with an Aboriginal providing the healing power for the ills of the world. It is noteworthy that the film is set in the year 2000. *Deadly* (1992) by Esben Storm,

a crime tale set against the Aboriginal deaths in custody issue, was a fair attempt to dovetail a standard narrative with an exposé of the treatment of Aboriginals. Tracey Moffat's *Bedevil* (1993) was a unique blend of Aboriginal myths given a contemporary spin. An underrated film of this period is *Blackfellas* (James Ricketson, 1993), which is about the attempts of an Aboriginal ex-prisoner to go straight, despite the pressures around him. This realistic and low-key tale says a great deal about the plight of Aborigines in the context of a racist system. On the other hand, in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994) there is a delightful sequence where a group of Aboriginals encounters the drag queens in the outback and participate in a musical segment at once amusing and fully accepting of these performers' lifestyle; this is reconciliation from the 'other side'.

The Life of Harry Dare (Aleksi Vellis, 1994) — another rarely seen film — is a matter-of-fact tale of an Aboriginal man and his family, trying to make a go of middle-class Australian life despite his background and the theft of his van. *Dead Heart* (Nick Parsons, 1996) is a brave attempt to mesh Aboriginal cultural themes with a small town drama that is symbolic of the wider tensions in the Australian community. The dense plotting and melodramatic romantic entanglements detract from what could have been an incisive look at attitudes to Aboriginal life from a number of angles.

It is a pleasure to view *Radiance* (1998), Rachel Perkins lovingly directed film based on a script by Louis Nowra. It is the story of a reunion of three Aboriginal sisters after the death of their mother. The insights into Aboriginal life and the differing perspectives on assimilation are compelling and the film won praise from many quarters. Unfortunately *The Missing* (Manuela Alberti, 1999) was a misjudged pot-boiler about a priest's search for faith via Aboriginal myths and legends in outback Australia. What might have been an intriguing synthesis of cultures turns into an over-heated and patronising thriller.

This decade has already seen some remarkable films released that overturn the traditional, skewed representations and stereotypes of Indigenous Australia and that challenge audience pre-conceptions. *One Night, the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001) is an impressive, musically and visually driven short feature about the search for a missing girl in the outback. The racist father is confronted by his attitudes when the black tracker assists the hunt. The resolution is both apt and (re)conciliatory. The Australian Children's Film and Television Foundation produced an excellent feature film, *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), which portrays a group of teenage male tribal Aboriginals and their experiences in the big city. The film is a good mix of kinetic energy and cultural commentary, well targeted to the youth market, and provides insights not previously seen in Aboriginal stories.

2002 saw the release of five remarkable films, each pushing the boundaries in terms of representing Aboriginal and white relations, and sending messages of reconciliation to a mainstream audience through the use of some clever cinematic devices. *Australian Rules* provided a cathartic sequence of events related to Aboriginal and white tensions in an outback South Australian town. *Black and White* (Craig Lahiff) is based on actual events in South Australia in the 1950s, and deals with the apprehension of an Aboriginal man for the death of a woman; a case that extended beyond the courtroom into the public media arena. This film is a restrained look at an angry event in political history that brought racist tensions to the surface. Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* is a carefully crafted insight into two young Aboriginals and their complex past experiences that inform their eventual

destinies. This haunting and conciliatory film addressed complex cultural issues in an accessible and spiritual way. *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer) is set in the 1930s and deals with the bringing to justice of an alleged Aboriginal murderer. The usage of paintings and song to work against the racist messages of the era is both startling and compelling, with a terrific performance from David Gulpilil as the tracker. (Intriguingly, Gulpilil's career mirrors closely the evolution of Aboriginal representation in Australian film.) Finally, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce) brought to the big screen the White Australia policy and the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families to facilitate assimilation. The anger in the film is palpable and (re)presents these historical issues with a powerful contemporary subtext. These five films were awarded a special prize by the Australian Catholic Film Office, indicating that Indigenous representation in Australian film has, to some extent, entered the mainstream and at the same time, become more accurate in its portrayal. One would hope that future films that deal with Indigenous Australia and related issues continue the fine tradition set in place by these films of 2002.

Discussion Topics

1. Do you think that indigenous stories should only be told by indigenous writers and film makers?
2. What are some of the social and political reasons for why it has taken so long for positive indigenous films to be made in Australia?
3. What are some of the indigenous issues, inherent in Australian society, that are yet to be told on film?

What to Watch

- **Rabbit Proof Fence**
- **Yolngu Boy**
- **Australian Rules**
- **Radiance**
- **Jedda**

Find out More

- **Message Stick**
<http://www.abc.net.au/message/>
- **Yolngu Boy**
<http://www.yolnguboy.com>
- **Film Australia Showcase: Indigenous Voices**
<http://filmaust.com.au/showcase/8478/default.asp>

Study Guides

- **Yolgnu Boy**
<http://www.enhancetv.com.au/shop/product.php?productid=12653806>

- **Rabbit Proof Fence**

<http://www.enhancetv.com.au/shop/product.php?productid=12653912>

- **Australian Rules**

<http://www.enhancetv.com.au/shop/product.php?productid=12653952>

Copyright Notice: Educational institutions may make and use copies of all or part of this Study Guide, only as reasonably required for its own purposes (for no copyright fees) and must not sell or lend such copies.