Metaphors of Femininity and the Australian Landscape: Two ‘New Wave’ Films

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During the so-called resurgence or ‘new wave’ of Australian cinema in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of films appeared which specifically focused on the Australian landscape. Many of these films were produced by white Australians not only as a result of the newly re-established Australian film industry, but also as a newly confident Australia itself. The landscape in these films was not simply an unscripted field against which the action of a narrative was played out, it was the very means by which these films proclaimed both their Australian identity and their cultural value. My interest lies in the role played by the Australian landscape in these popular and nationally influential narratives, and the resonance this has with a number of feminist theories relating to representation and subjectivity.

In a number of popular Australian films from the period, such as Sunday Too Far Away, We of the Never Never, Picnic at Hanging Rock and The Man From Snowy River, the Australian landscape is foregrounded as the entity which defines, contains or motivates the narrative occurring within it. Within the context of Australia’s struggle to establish a national identity, these films point to the Australian landscape as one of the primary determining features of ‘Australianness’ in cultural products of the 1970s. For the predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, urban Australian culture at the time, the view of the production of these films was no alternative culture, lifestyle, ritual, history or society which could be used to delineate their ‘difference’ from their British colonial ancestor other than the ‘climate’, of the Australian bush. The only element which white Australians could draw upon to explain their ‘difference’ from other world cultures was their environment, and the short span of history and myth which this had engendered. In effect it is a white mythology about the Australian landscape which gave birth to, and has been used to legitimate a concentration on the nineteenth century legend of the Australian bushman-as-hero, but also to the wave of Australian artists who struggled to define their own national and artistic identities in the 1970s.

Landscapes was a recurring theme in the Australian artistic environment during the 1970s. Despite the fact that Australian artists continued to draw heavily on international styles and were keen to avoid the stigma of parachutism, there was a strongly perceived need to define the artistic position of Australia within the world scene, and to avoid Australian art being labelled ‘secondary’ or ‘satellite’.” (McDowell, 1984: 42) This point of view was prevalent in both artistic and political circles. Specifically ‘Australian’ culture, as seen in a vehicle for establishing Australia on the world scene as a separate nation with a history and culture distinct from both Britain and the U.S.A. The Australian landscape is referred to again and again in painting, music, theatre and film, as the element which helps to delineate and explain the origins, and the value, of the work and of the artist.

In ‘The Man From Snowy River’, the artistic medium which most enthusiastically embraced the whole package of the landscape and used it as a visually loaded device within its investigation of the ‘Australian character’. More than the other art which imitated, re-created, imagined and altered the landscape as part of their artistic message, the film used the Australian landscape itself as a canvas. In the twentieth century, the medium of film has replaced fine art as the representational system which is able to deny its status as that of a representational medium, and - perhaps merely as recording or re-creating an existing reality. Within this scenario the ‘resurgence’ of Australian film in the 1970s purported to present the Australian landscape to the audience, and to the world, as it ‘really’ was (i.e. as it was ‘seen’) rather than as being how a certain group of people chose to represent it. As Ross Gibson again points out:

The ethos of subtext geography which are so prevalent and conspicuous in Australian feature films are deliberately created as a means of communicating seemingly objective messages (Gibson, 1983: 49).

Thus in the Australian feature films of this period, the ideological statements of a particular generation of white, urban, educated, and generally male artists about the Australian landscape were carefully structured into a medium which presented them to a wide (and credulous) audience as the representation of truth about the landscape and, by implication also about the inherent ‘nature’ of the Australian character. And it is important to note that in ‘Man From Snowy River’ the subtext and super-sekret that film-makers are attempting to create Australian culture are transforming mainstream Australians, in the landscape even as they are acting to stamp their own some nature on the external nature of the costumes. (Gibson, 1983: 50)

This paper examines the role of landscape in two extensively successful Australian films from the period, The Man From Snowy River made in 1982 and Picnic at Hanging Rock made in 1975, from the perspective of some feminist theories regarding subjectivity. Both films have come to be viewed as icons of Australian film history and to some extent Australian national identity itself, and both imbue the landscape with a sense of otherness and power which is an important element in the characters.

Jim Craig, the hero in The Man From Snowy River, is a child of the wild mountains. The film takes the Victorian high country and turns it into a mythic landscape, a metaphor for Australian male identity. Jim is born in the high country and has an innate understanding of, and affinity with, the mountains and the wild horses. Jim leaves and journeys down to the plains in order to prove himself, before he is permitted to return and take his place as one of the mountain men. In essence Jim must prove his ability to control both the nature and the actions of the characters. The horses and eventually the woman, before he is able to take possession of the land which is his, is very Australian, birghtard. The mountains play a pivotal role in the production of Jim’s adult masculine identity. In the beginning of the film, after the death of his father, the mountain men order Jim down to the plains in order to ‘earn’ the right to live up in the mountains. They will brook no argument on the point, and Spart tells Jim “It’s a hard country, makes for hard men”. From the outset therefore, the mountains are identified with the ‘creates’ men. Down in the low country, it is the skills Jim has acquired in the mountains which make him stand out in the crowd. Jim is the only one who can see the potential of the land, makes Jim learn to do anything tangible. Whatever skills the mountain men expected him to learn, it seems he already possess - horse breaking, hard work, a sense of responsibility, courage, moral values etc., simply by virtue of his heritage. What he does not have is the ability, or perhaps the will, to exercise mastery over the objects of exchange within patriarchal culture, that is what he has been sent to learn. Jim’s qualities are obviously genetic, his mountain mother has made him what he is (the character of Jim’s real mother is profoundly absent from the narrative) but the boy child must separate himself from the mountain mother in order to become a man and return to take possession of the land. In the famous ‘kiss on the back’ scene, the woman Jim hopes to win, Jessica, looks out across the Victorian high country and observes to Jim: “It’s time you went somewhere.” Jim’s condition is that of the child being sent away from the ‘mother’ in an attempt to reach the ‘father’. In this sense, the ‘father’ is seen as a synthesis of the mountain men, and Jim is passive, he has been sent to learn. The suppression and displacement of female sexuality within this text of The Man From Snowy River is balanced by a corresponding hysteria regarding the need to prevent the female landscape within the dictates of the patriarchal system. The two black stallions which are used explicitly to symbolise the dangers of uncontrolled male sexuality throughout the film are eventually contained (literally within the stockyards) by Jim Craig once he has assumed the mantle of adult masculinity (incidentally receiving in return for his efforts the possession of the gold mines previously held by the stallion and, or perhaps including, Harrison’s daughter Jessica).

What is never acknowledged, but is implicit throughout this film, is the role of female sexuality in the definition, and indeed the very existence of, the masculine subject. When Jim tells his father that only a crafty mountain man can catch the stallion, his father replies “You’ve got your mother’s way about you haven’t you”. It is the mountains which supply Jim with the strength and the skill with which to overcome his obstacle. In this film, the mountain mother is one and the same. The gold which will give Spart access to the position of the patriarch must be revealed and presented to Jim with his shirt turned up to his knees. The two stallions representing male sexuality are valued specifically because of their maternal lineage from the valuable mare ‘Old Regret’. And there is Jessica’s mother (and perhaps the mother...
of all Australians) Matilda. Matilda, like Eve, is the cause of all the trouble, representing rampant sexuality into the wild unacknowledged originators of the action. As a result, masculine exchange, and yea they are actually the in features of this unacknowledged female sexuality, and different.

The Australian bush is overtly that of destroyer. Picnic of characteristics or symbols. The narrative is driven by the tension between a powerful otherworldly purity such a way as to present it as a kind of supernatural personification of wisdom and power. The Man From Snowy River is totally unable to communicate any information about their experience. The secret of the rock is portrayed as inaccessible to those who chose to remain within the Symbolic world of language and rational explanation.

The film portrays the rock itself as a container of ancient power and truth and the Australian landscape as beautiful and desirable. As with patriarchal representations of women and female sexuality, the landscape is linked to all that is beyond the power of rational explanation, that which is natural, essential and opposed to the civilisation created by 'man'. However in traditional representational forms, nature is subordinated to and controlled by the forces of culture. In this situation however, there is a conflicting national agenda. As the landscape is the very thing which defines the film as Australian, and therefore provides it's unique cultural value, the land needs to be valued more highly than the culture of the British civilisation from which Australia was at pains to differentiate itself. The filmmakers get over this obstacle by effectively splitting the idea of culture into that which is 'good' culture (i.e. that which is true and can therefore be linked with the Australian landscape, such as Beethoven and Boticelli) and that which is false, ignorant and repressive, which is then allocated to anything British. Thus the Australian national face is saved, but the film can still employ traditional narrative forms. This allows the filmmakers to operate and be accepted within the artistic structures of Western culture, while simultaneously not depriving themselves of a place in the 'new' Australian culture which aims to differentiate itself from its European heritage. Both these films incorporate the psychological requirements of a Western movie, masculine subjectivity, located within the physical and historical Australian environment, into their representational and narrative structures. In effect it is the Australian landscape which 'gave birth to' the wave of Australian filmmakers who were then struggling to define their own national and artistic identities and to be accepted on the world stage.

The landscape played an important role in these films as the generator of their desire to be termed Australian (and thus for the writers, directors and photographers to be considered Australian artists). However this produced an internal contradiction when it came to the actual representation of the landscape, due to the narrative requirement for the male hero to undertake an Oedipal separation from the generating or maternal force as part of his own personal journey. Within these specifically Australian narrative texts therefore, the land defines the hero, but it is also that from which he must differentiate himself.

A parallel can be drawn here with Nancy Chodorow's discussion of the contradictions inherent in the development of core male gender identity due to the sex of the mother. Chodorow suggests that 'a boy must learn his gender identity as being non-female, or not-mother' (Chodorow, 1980: 13) and that the internalisation of characteristics of the mother by the male child, produces a situation where the child is simultaneously in love and hatred of the female subject. This situation, derived from the internalisation of features of the mother and the Australian landscape, produces a situation in which the land is inherently imbued with feminine or maternal characteristics within a patriarchal representational economy. The landscape constantly overwhelsms or overpowers the male characters, and in turn carry the contradiction of an inherently alienated core gender identity, being both defined by, and alienated from, the great southern land which surrounds them. Overly the land is represented as that which reflects the character of the Australian male hero; harsh but honest. But underlying this identification is the concept of a lost female territory, wide, empty, primary, desirable and terrifying, which is both part of, and separate from the male subject. The Australian context therefore provides an opportunity for femininity to operate as a floating signifier within these texts. It is not tied simply to the devalued 'other' position, but is able to shift across and challenge traditional oppositional structures by virtue of the specifically Australian need to value the landscape while not simultaneously devaluing Western culture.

What has been established through this brief analysis is that the Australian landscape in these films has been positioned in such a way as to address the desires of an alienated masculine subject, both within and outside of the narrative. Along with woman, the land has been forced to take on the characteristics of man's 'other', the object of his desire, the lack situation between the need and demand of the masculine subject within patriarchal culture. (Grosz, 1990, 66-67)

Also, most importantly, it is the imaginary landscape depicted in these films which in turn has helped to structure a particular modern concept of Australian identity. The Australian landscapes as portrayed in these films have had a strong influence on our ideas about ourselves. I believe that the gendered representation strategies employed in the depiction of landscape in these films, and elsewhere in Australian cultural texts, needs to be identified and addressed. There is no doubt that these myths of landscape continue to have a strong influence on ideas about our national character, and their influence is particularly relevant now as we move towards the end of this century and the possibility of an Australian republic.

REFERENCES


