Groupings and Gropings in Australian Cinema

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Adi Wimmer: Australian Film: Cultures, Identities, Texts (WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, ISBN 9783868210040, €25.50)

The revival of Australian film in the 1970s had a sense of 'projecting the nation', if not necessarily with a conscious agenda. This period introduced the exploration of such key binarisms as bush and city, Australia and Britain, nature and culture. There were often narratives enshrining such so-called national characteristics as the 'fair go', mateship, the Aussie battler – notions that informed the blockbuster successes of the 1980s (The Man from Snowy River, Crocodile Dundee) and much of the discourse on Australian film since.

Those binarisms were undoubtedly important but other matters have now emerged in the national cinema. One is the rise of international co-productions such as Baz Luhrmann's Moulin Rouge! or his forthcoming Australia. Another is a shift towards films that conform to genre conventions, recognisable because of their long association with predominantly US production habits. Some of the films I have in mind are Kenny and Razzle Dazzle (mockumentaries), Wolf Creek (horror), Three Dollars, Tom White (urban drama), You and Your Stupid Mate (broad comedy), Lucky Miles (road movie), Thunderstruck, One Perfect Day (musicals), Clubland (maternal melodrama).

Adi Wimmer’s Australian Film: Cultures, Identities, Texts is a book-length study of Australian cinema’s idiosyncrasies and vicissitudes by an Austrian scholar, published by a German company. Its subtitle points to its ambition. There is nothing especially new in the kind of cultural contextualising in which Wimmer engages, but it is an approach which makes rigorous demands on the foreign scholar, demands that this author is not always able to meet. There is nothing especially new in the kind of cultural contextualising in which Wimmer engages, but it is an approach which makes rigorous demands on the foreign scholar, demands that this author is not always able to meet. He takes on large, inescapable issues such as the ‘land’, the ‘bush-city conflict’, ‘Australia in Asia’ (and ‘Asians in Australia’), the country’s increasingly mixed ethnicity and policies developed to comprehend this (from ‘White Australia’, through assimilation, integration and multiculturalism), and a masculinist ethos that accounts for some deplorable attitudes to gender and sexuality.

The author conscientiously picks his way around these issues, but one can’t help wondering if ‘visits’ and ‘personal communications with the author’, two sources cited, can quite yield the lived-in, gut responses that come as second nature after decades of residence. I don’t just mean actual errors – anyone can make those, and this author does – but a less easy to define sense of what Australia feels like as a political and cultural entity to live in. Wimmer properly makes much of the ‘diversity’ that liberal-thinking Australians embrace, but it doesn’t feel as if he’s experienced it at first hand, and he is too eager to move into generalisation. This sounds grudging, and indeed the point could be foolishly extended to suggest that no-one should ever write about life as lived outside one’s native territory. Of course, I don’t mean that.

But one needs a certain wariness in attributing connections – in this case, between the way things are and the way they have been variously represented in our films, or the extent to which film might/can/does project the multifarious national culture.

Wimmer rehearses well-worn scenarios about how Australia all but led the world in cinema until the US established its stranglehold on exhibition, the rise of the outback genre, the postwar feature-filmmaking famine, the revival of the 1970s and so on. For students coming fresh to Australian cinema, some such description of its contours is doubtless desirable. However, there are already more than several such trajectory tracings. This one doesn’t offer many insights, and those that it does seem odd. Its defence of the ‘ocker’ films, for instance, doesn’t adequately distinguish between good-natured sex romps, such as Alvin Purple, and films with more serious claims to attention, such as Petersen or Don’s Party.

Indeed, Wimmer’s agenda is not clear, nor is the book’s intended readership immediately apparent. He is obsessed with the idea of ‘national cinema’, and it is no doubt a very important and provocative matter, but it is unclear what he implies by the term. Any film scholar needs to attempt some demystifying of this slippery concept, which may be seen to embrace not merely the relation between the films produced and the wider community culture(s) but their difference from those of other key film-producing countries and how the local industry functions as an industry, and its reception, both critical and
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popular. These are big questions and one wouldn’t ask any single book to address them all in detail, but if an author aspires to do so, as Wimmer often seems to, then one looks for more thoroughgoing excavation.

The book works hard at the notions of cultural diversity in Australia, questioning the degrees of acceptance of Aborigines, Asians, multiculturalism and disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, the author too easily slides into asserting connections where, in a more profound study, much more – and more convincing – supportive evidence would be needed. His general procedure in each chapter is to provide a brief context for the issue under discussion, then to engage in a long account of a relevant film.

Wimmer’s insistence on the continuing centrality of the landscape in Australian films is worth pondering. Given his way of ushering in a cinematic preoccupation then launching into a long, largely descriptive account of a couple of films, mainly in terms of narrative events, one suspects he misses some resonances by not casting his net more widely.

It is a pity Wimmer didn’t discriminate between ‘small-town’ and ‘rural’. The film texts he addresses have notably different kinds of focus that derive from the difference. One of my personal ongoing gripes about Australian films is not with their obsession with the land and the landscape, but with their usually patronising representation of small-town life, such as in Dean Murphy’s Strange Bedfellows (2004). In this film, a twenty-first century scenario about two men posing as gay for tax breaks is grafted onto a condescending picture of how the rest of their small town seems to have noticed nothing since the 1950s.

Ultimately Wimmer does offer some stimulating insights into ways Australian culture, as refracted through its films, has been evolving over the last several decades. For my part, though, I wish he’d spent less time going over well-ploughed fields and cast his eye more appraisingly over what is happening in those recent genre transmutations in Australian films in which, say, the road movie and the mockumentary are given an antipodean spin.

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