**Australian identity**

Australians have spent more than a century debating national identity.

Australian language analyst John Douglas Pringle called the search for

identity 'that aching tooth'. Historian Donald Horne, on the other hand,

argued that there never has been and never will be a unique and definable

Australian identity. In a 2003 reprint of a 1958 book called The Australian

Legend, Russell Ward wrote that national character is a people's idea of

itself. While it is often romantic and out of touch with reality, it does

influence how people behave. Ward believed Australians see themselves as:

• practical, inventive and good at improvising

• rough and-ready in manners

• quick to criticise authority or show-offs

• willing to 'have a go'

• believing 'near enough is good enough' for most tasks

• swearing, gambling and drinking often

• capable of hard work if required, but don't normally see the need

• preferring leisure over hard work (despite statistical evidence of heavy

work habits)

• not keen on intellectual ideas and culture

• believing Jack is as good as his master

• believing in a 'fair go'

• sticking by their mates through thick and thin.

Even in 1958 many disagreed with Ward's ideas of the typical Australian.

They pointed to the fact that he appeared to have ignored females entirely

and had focused too much on the time-honoured working class male - the

stereotypical bushman. Today there are many other competing ideas of

national identity. Sport is influential in Australia's national identity - from

Don Bradman and Phar Lap to the Sydney Olympics and the World Cup. After dwindling in the 1970s, the Anzac legend was revived in the twenty first century as important to modern Australians. Aboriginal culture has a place in national identity after having been ignored for most of the past 200 years. Multicultural Australia has replaced the older idea of Anglo-Celtic Australia. The idea of a 'fair go' for all is still seen as important.

The beach is an icon of modern identity today in the same way that the bush

was in the nineteenth century. The life-saver has replaced the bushman as

one of our most important role models. The suburbs, too, are being

recognised as uniquely and positively Australian. Increasing interest in

environmental issues has changed the character of the bush myth, but the

love of nature has remained.

There is no more agreement about the Australian identity now than there

was when Russell Ward wrote in the 1950s of the typical Australian. But

one element is common to almost all interpretations - the importance of

landscape. Most Australians live in cities, points out political and social

commentator Don Watson, but they still think of Australia as a landscape.

'As we globalise, this will become our great national advantage, the one

thing that defines us.'

Discourses in Australian film

Australian filmmakers have explored a number of themes and discourses

over the past one hundred years of movie-making in this country. Some of

these themes have featured strongly in certain periods in history. For

instance, Australian identity films often crop up during times of national

crisis and change. Other themes do not seem ever to go away and have been

revisited again and again throughout the period.

Every filmmaker has dealt with the theme in a slightly different way - and of

course audience members have had different understandings of the theme in

different time periods and locations. Watching a 1970s film at the time it

was made is not the same as watching it now.

Sometimes Australian filmmakers have had an eve for overseas markets and

used stereotypes they think would appeal to international audiences. Paul

Hogan did that with Crocodile Dundee (1986). At other times a film may be

directed to a local Australian audience, perhaps attempting to change

opinion or engage in a debate. Jindabyne (2006) is a film that engages in a

localised Australian debate.

Surprisingly, the most revisited themes of the Australian cinema arc not the

same as those in Australian television. And the themes do not necessarily

represent the same concerns that Australian people have in their daily lives.

They do represent our imaginations, however. They are like conversations -

with different points of view expressed as the discourse progresses.

Common themes or discourses

**Mateship.** According to Brian McFarlane, 'The sentimental ideal of

mateship may well be Australia's chief contribution to the history of human

relationships.' Mateship depicts a code of equality, solidarity and friendship -

usually amongst males. It isn't unique to Australia, but it probably became

important in early colonial times because the harsh environment meant

sticking together was essential for survival.

**The idea of mateship** has become significant in the Australian cinema, wheremale to male relationships often seem as important as male to female ones.

Two forms of mateship are common in the cinema.

1. Inclusive mateship is seen in a positive light as a response to

overwhelming hardship. This is the mateship of war shown in

Gallipoli (1981) and Kokoda (2006). It is the mateship that allows

survival in hostile environments, as in The Overlanders (1946). In

these films a strong woman can sometimes be 'one of the boys'. This

kind of mateship can also be multicultural, as in Footy Legends

(2006).

2. Exclusive mateship in Australian movies is usually demonstrated

when a group bands together to exclude anyone different. Between

1970 and 1990 this form of mateship was usually directed against

women - as in Shame (1987), a movie said to be based on a series of

real-life assaults.

**The Aussie larrikin.** The tradition of the larrikin is strong in Australian

cinema. A larrikin is someone who mocks authority in a playful and comic

way. A larrikin doesn't go along with the usual polite norms of society and

loves to 'upset the apple-cart'. The best known film larrikin is Crocodile

Dundee. Mick Molloy in Crackerjack (2002) is another example.

**The Aussie battler**. The tradition of the battler in Australian literature and

film extends back to Henry Lawson. The Aussie battler is an underdog who

struggles for survival with great determination against enormous odds.

Early-twentieth-century films showed battlers overcoming environmental or

economic odds. Films of the 1970s and 1980s often showed the battler pitted

against society and conformity. It is not unusual for the battler to be a

woman struggling against social pressures, as in My Brilliant Career (1979)

and Muriel's Wedding (1994). The films Tom White (2004) and Three

Dollars (2005) feature middle-class battlers in the 2000s who struggle with

job retrenchments and mortgage repayments.

Victory in defeat. According to film critic Tom Ryan, Australian films tend

to place the protagonist as the 'victim' of events rather than as the shaper of

them. He contrasts this with American films in which the protagonist drives

events and 'makes things happen'. This can possibly be traced back to

Australia's roots as a penal colony and to the Australian experience of defeat

at Gallipoli. Similarly, the inhospitable Australian environment often makes

us the victim of events beyond our control, such as floods and droughts.

Gallipoli and the Boer War movie Breaker Morant (1980) are examples of

films where defeat is in some way recast as victory.

**Outback landscapes.** Most Australian films have been about the landscape

in some way, says writer and filmmaker Ross Gibson. Landscape has almost

become a character in our films and is often shown to have shaped the

natures of the human characters.

Part of the reason for this, Gibson suggests, is that non-Aboriginal Australia

is a young country that has few myths of belonging. The culture and most of

its people are relatively recent transplants who have had to come to terms

with their new environment. For modern Australians, the outback has

become a recognisable national symbol filmed to look aweinspiring and

grand, or inhospitable and sometimes eerie or haunted.

Another explanation for the outback motif is that international audiences

expect it when they see an Australian film. For them, it has become the one

symbol that has a unique Australian identity.

While there are many different portrayals of the Australian landscape, two

landscape discourses are common.

These are:

• The bush as paradise. Many films celebrate the bush as a place

where the natural world allows people to reach their full potential. In

the bush there is a purity and honesty not found in the city. People can

build proper relationships with nature and with one another. This can

be seen in The Man from Snowy River (1982) and Crocodile Dundee

(1986).

• The bush as unknowable and hostile. The overwhelming sense of

emptiness in the cutback can often inspire fear. Films often portray the

Australian landscape as an awesome opponent or as the source of

some mysterious terror. These movies show how the cutback twists

and disturbs people in some way. Examples include Picnic at Hanging

Rock (1975), Japanese Story (2003) and Wolf Creek (R-rated, 2005).

In each case there is a sense of something overpowering or

supernatural in the bush.

In 1992 the Mabo decision on native title established that Australia was not

an 'empty land' at the time of white settlement but was in the possession of

its Aboriginal people. This changed the portrayal of landscape in Australian

cinema, especially in the 2000s. There is now an increasing recognition in

modern Australian cinema of the Aboriginal presence in the landscape.

Country towns. Film academic Tom O'Regan points out that small country

towns have come to represent all that is bad in Australian culture, and all

that city people can pretend they are above, such as racism, sexism,

violence, homophobia and aggressive male dominance. Examples extend

from The Cars That Ate Paris (1974) to The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen

of the Desert (1994). This trend in the cinema is the opposite of that in

television soap operas, where small towns are generaliy portrayed in a

positive light, reflecting a yearning for traditional close-knit communities.

Suburbia. Australian film has demonstrated mixed attitudes to suburbia. It

can be seen as a supporting and very personal place that is somehow

essential to Australian life, as in The Castle (1997). It can be a threatening

and dysfunctional place of unemployment and petty crime, as in The Boys

(1998) or even Idiot Box (1996). A third discourse about suburbia sees it as

an appallingly dull and conformist place that has to be escaped from, as in

Muriel's Wedding (1994). In this third discourse, suburbia is often a source

of humour.

**Multiculturalism.** Immigrants have come to Australia from all over the

world. Films have explored the migrant experience in various ways in

different eras. The first Australian film to deal with non-Anglo- Celtic

immigration was They're a Weird Mob (1966). The film took an

assimilationist approach. It showed how an Italian migrant to Sydney fitted

in, learned Aussie ways and became an 'ocker'. Silver City (1984) told of the

bigotry that often confronted postwar migrants. Since the 1990s a number of

films have presented a multicultural rather than assimilationist view.

Examples include Head On (R-rated, 1997), The Wog Boy

(2000) and Looking for Alibrandi (2000). Questions of Australian identity

still arise in these films, however, as in the experience of the Vietnamese

characters in Footy Legends (2006).

Aboriginal culture. For the first 50 years of Australian cinema Aboriginal

Australians were notable by their absence. Charles Chauvel's Jedda (1955)

was the first film to give Aboriginal people starring roles. Jedda was an

Aboriginal girl raised by a white family. At the time, the government took an

assimilationist approach to Aboriginal people - believing their culture should

and would be absorbed by European culture. The 1970s revival of Australian

film and the political upheavals of the time led to a renewed interest in

Aboriginal Australia. Aboriginal activist and academic Marcia Langton says

films of this era tended to portray Aborigines as romantic figures, often with

special mystical powers. Examples include The Last Wave (1977) and The

Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith (1978).

Between the 1970s and the 2000s several factors changed the film discourses

around Aboriginal Australians.

1. Multiculturalism as government policy rejected the assimilationist

approaches of the past.

2. Aboriginal filmmakers such as Rachel Perkins, who directed One Night

the Moon (2001), Tracey Moffatt (Bedevil, 1993) and Ivan Sen, director of

Beneath Clouds (2002), produced feature films.

3. The 1992 Mabo decision overturned the founding myth of terra nullius

('empty land'). This changed filmmakers' relationship to Aboriginal

characters in their films; it also changed the cinema's attitude to landscape.

4. There was a growing international interest in collecting Aboriginal art.

5. Aboriginal actors, such as Deborah Mailman, Ernie Dingo and David

Gulpilil, became well known.

6. The 1997 report into the 'stolen generations' of Aboriginal children

removed from their families was released. The 'stolen generations' is the

subject of the film Rabbit Proof Fence (2002).

Dead Heart (1996) was one of the first new films to address the social crisis

in Aboriginal communities. During the 2000s there has been a greater

emphasis on Aboriginal people telling their own stories. Films such as Ten

Canoes (2006) have a positive story of Aboriginal culture to tell. The film

draws on Aboriginal oral storytelling traditions. Kanyini (2006) attempts to

show from their own point of view why Aboriginal people are struggling.

Other films, such as Jindabyne (2006), have used dramatic narrative to

engage in the debate about reconciliation from the perspective of white

society.

**Uncommon themes or discourses**

Some themes or discourses that are common in the cinemas of other nations

are notable by their absence in Australian film.

Grand romantic love. Unlike the French or American cinema, there are few

great romantic love stories in Australian cinema, says film and television

writer and reviewer Debi Enker. This is not because Australian films reject

love stories, she suggests, but because love seems to be rarely explored in

any depth. As subplots in movies, love and passion are often shown to be

doomed or beset with problems, says Enker. One Australian love story is A

Town Like Alice (1956), which tells of a couple kept apart by World War

11. Another is Paperback Hero (1998).

Social class. Australian films do not often address social class or economic

inequality. Rich and poor rarely come together in one film, and any form of

serious social class conflict within the film is even rarer. Brief encounters

with class differences are usually smoothed over, with people found to 'all

be the same underneath'. This occurs in The Castle (1997), when Darryl and

the Queen's Counsel lawyer find a bond in shared fatherhood.

Where class does appear as an issue it tends to be in films about work,

showing the divisions between the boss and the worker, as happens in

Spotswood (1991).