
Offshore Processes: International Perspectives on Australian Film and Television

8-11 July 2012, Monash Prato Centre, Italy

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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Conference organized by Therese Davis, Liz Conor, Mark Gibson and Tony Moore

- 1 Australian cinema has never been solely national, neither in the contexts of its production nor in its themes and influences. It reflects the cultural and historical diversity of a continent that has been shaped by the sovereign presence of Indigenous people and more than two centuries of migration. Australian film and television is diverse and inherently international. The symposium “Offshore Processes: International Perspectives on Australian Film and Television” explored the transnational contexts of Australian film and television past and present.
- 2 The symposium was organised by scholars from Melbourne’s Monash University and held at its Italian campus in Prato. Scholars from disciplinary backgrounds as diverse as cinema and media studies, history and Australian cultural studies were engaged in placing a national cinema into its decidedly global dimensions. The symposium was not merely multi-disciplinary but indeed *inter*-disciplinary as it provided a fruitful dialogue on the different approaches to a transnational understanding of national cinemas.
- 3 Despite the international composition of Australia, Australian studies is still practiced within a largely national framework. In this, quite aside from the focus on film and television, the symposium was highly innovative in placing the study on Australia in a broader context. The symposium’s theorisation of Australia’s place in the world is a timely approach and will hopefully serve as an incentive for future conferences and

symposia, not merely in the area of film and television studies but Australian studies more generally.

- 4 The symposium started with the public screening of Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia* (2008). Shown in Prato's unroofed Emperor's castle, the open-air screening of the almost three-hour long film was a spectacular event in itself. Beneath the clear Tuscan evening sky, the colours of the Australian landscape appeared much brighter and alive than in any indoor cinema. *Australia* is a much-debated film set in the Northern Territory during the Second World War. It tells the story of an English lady planning to sell her husband's cattle station. Driving the cattle to Darwin, she not only experiences many adventures but eventually falls in love with the 'Drover', an embodiment of white Australian masculinity. They become a couple and informally adopt an Indigenous orphan boy who is exposed to racial persecution. The film is a mixture of romance and adventure story set in the Australian outback, which is a frequently occurring theme in Australian films. The novelty of the film lies with its focus on racism and the forcible abduction of Indigenous children from their families. This systematic policy aimed at alienating Indigenous children from their cultural heritage, thus to destroy Indigenous cultures, and is sometimes referred to as genocide. Marcia Langton, an Indigenous academic and intellectual, appraised *Australia* as having given Australia a "new past", one that reflects the processes of reconciliation. *Australia* has evoked manifold reactions among Australian and non-Australian audiences alike – from extreme dislike to embracement. One thing is for sure: *Australia* is also a political movie as its reception transcends mere liking and disliking but relates to issues of inter-racial history and the legitimacy of using national(istic) stereotypes.
- 5 The first keynote address, by Meaghan Morris, followed the screening and focussed on the film *Australia*. It explored the ways a national story (or perhaps rather history) is being narrated from a transnational perspective. This perspective presupposes the use of signifiers or clichés – whether national or gendered – with which the audiences are familiar and can thus relate to past experiences and meaning. Blockbusters such as *Australia*, Morris argues, transgress national boundaries, requiring audiences to be able to easily grasp its underlying rhetoric and images. Clichés are powerful for a film's subtle images being either successfully conveyed or lost. The focus of textual analysis should thus not rely on the deconstruction of a cliché as morally or artistically right or wrong but rather analyse its mechanisms of conveying meaning. The question of whether *Australia* is a good or a bad film is not the actual academic task, but it is to understand whether or not audiences, Australian and international, recognise particular clichés and so derive meaning from them.
- 6 *Australia* was not the only film discussed in the symposium. Remarkably, there were eight short films being screened, one in presence of its filmmaker: Anna Cole co-produced *Dancing with the Prime Minister* (2010), a documentary on the history of female Indigenous debutantes in the 1960s, a time when Indigenous affairs became increasingly visible on a national scene. The film draws on interviews conducted with former debutantes and their families and is a very sensitive and powerful document of Indigenous history in Australia. *Dancing with the Prime Minister* has been regarded as primarily tailored to Indigenous audiences (I would add: to all audiences related to Indigenous cultures and people). This leads to the question of how regional films can best be 'translated' into international contexts, given that a screening of the film is being planned on the BBC. The Indigenous protagonists of the film, let alone Indigenous

history and politics, are hardly known outside Australia. This issue has practical consequences for Indigenous films entering the European market: Indigenous films need to be contextualised historically and culturally — as, for example, in the form of a title sequence — when being shown in Europe.

- 7 The symposium also focussed on the international contexts of Australian film production; the highly successful role of Australian women filmmakers was analysed in its international dimensions. Australian women film producers have been highly successful not only nationally but also internationally. Government funding played a crucial role for this gendered specificity in Australian film history. Many papers were theoretically challenging not only for the study of Australian films but film and cinema studies as such. The theorisation of the meanings of transnationalism in national cinemas has contributed to a differentiated view of Australian films as have the many empirical approaches to Australian cinema, especially the presentation of a database on Asian-Australian films (<http://asianaustriancinema.org>). This database comprises 539 film entries as well as entries on directors and production companies relating to Asian-Australian films. It provides an immensely useful platform for systematic scholarly research on the history of Asian-Australian cinema.
- 8 The transnational approach to Australian film and television has covered the processes in the production of Australian screen content as well as its international reception. A collaborative paper explored the reception of the Indigenous-produced film *Samson and Delilah* (2009) by French and German audiences. The film has been regarded as highly ‘disturbing’ and considered a form of ‘documentary’ of Indigenous ‘problems’. It tells the story of a young Indigenous couple that, almost without speaking a word, overcomes the inter-generational conflicts in their community by escaping to Alice Springs. Among Indigenous critics the film has been largely conceived of as a positive document of Indigenous sovereignty and survival. In Germany and France it has been perceived rather negatively as a document of Indigenous ‘misery’. Audience-reception in both countries has evinced different patterns, especially the lack of physiological classification in Germany, reflecting post-National Socialist discourses of racial representation. In France, Indigenous protagonists were often regarded as “in-authentic” and not “Indigenous enough”, reflecting discourses on Indigenous (physical) authenticity both in France and Australia. In Germany, Indigenous claims to sovereignty were largely misconceived as essentialism. The comparative analysis highlighted, in conjunction with Anna Cole’s film, the importance of contextualising (Indigenous) Australian films for Europe-based audiences. There is considerable interest in (Indigenous) Australian films in Europe yet this interest is also distinguished by a lack of recognising cultural clichés on the side of European audiences.
- 9 The symposium also included a workshop on international collaboration and funding possibilities. The options of large-scale international partnerships have been discussed as much as shorter collaborative projects between individual scholars in different countries. The symposium was a great intellectual and academic incentive for the future practice of Australian film and television studies as well as Australian studies generally. The conveners — Therese Davis, Tony Moore, Liz Conor and Mark Gibson — have excelled in making “Offshore Processes” an intellectually and humanly engaging event.

AUTEUR

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