

BOOK REVIEW

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Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, Australian Cinema after Mabo, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

The book deals with the way cinema speaks to and interacts with cultural changes in Australia after the 1992 Mabo judgment. This decision overthrew the concept of *terra nullius*—that Australia, at its settlement, belonged to no-one. According to Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, it initiated a “backtracking” over familiar icons in films, which have come to be seen in a new light, which recognises prior indigenous presence in Australian history, memory and belonging. Their film readings acknowledge the effects of trauma for Indigenous people and contemplate grief-work for white Australians as we come to recognise a shameful past.

Collins and Davis have an established presence in cinema studies. Collins is known for her book on *The Films of Gillian Armstrong*, as well as film reviews and articles on grief-work in autobiography that have informed *Australian Cinema after Mabo*. Davis is familiar from her book, *The Face on the Screen: Death, Recognition and Spectatorship* and work on questions of recognition and Mabo, evident in the chapter on this theme in the book. It is amongst the first wide-ranging analyses to consider Australian films of the 1990s and covers an area in cinema studies that I, for one, have been waiting for. The history wars of the 1990s impacted powerfully on the public. This book extends these concerns into how Australians conceive of ourselves in cinematic terms, a topic which is of relevance to cinema goers, filmmakers, and film studies specialists.

Each chapter examines a varying number of films. These readings paint a discerning picture of contemporary films, in their responses to three main themes that correspond to the sections into which the book is divided: the history wars, landscape and belonging, and trauma, grief and coming of age. During the period from 2000–3, notably 2002, there was a plethora of films specifically dealing with indigenous-white relations.

However, while Collins and Davis deal with many of these, they do not limit themselves to films specifically on this topic and range widely over films in the 1990s, including films on landscape that revisit iconic landscapes; desert, country and urban as well as other themes relevant in the cultural context after Mabo.

The first chapter establishes the theme of “backtracking” after Mabo and discusses the theoretical grounding for the book in its linking of film, historical and cultural theory. The book revisits these terms and theories throughout the film readings, as well as setting up relevant conceptual foundations for each chapter. This theoretical discussion is fairly clear and convincing in its treatment of trauma, but the description of other elements, notably Walter Benjamin’s model of “shock” as both an element of the form of film montage and a way of conceptualising history, are somewhat convoluted and at times confused. I confess to not being familiar with Benjamin’s work in this area, but nor was I enlightened. Benjamin is represented as linking montage in film with the shock and discontinuity of the rapid transformations of modernity. Parallel to this runs a theory of history as perceived in flashes which occur in dialectical moments when past and present collide. This is mediated by discontinuity and is contrasted with the perception of continuity between past and present. An outline of memory in association with history and trauma follows. The authors also refer to Miriam Hansen’s historically-grounded theoretical work which sees cinema as an informal public space of understanding.

The reference to Benjamin’s theories appears to be an attempt to marry film and historical theory in a way that takes account of what has been a long period of historical amnesia about the effects of and responsibility for indigenous dispossession. But whether this phenomenon can be slotted into the theory of history described and explained by shock and discontinuity requires more evidence and argument. White Australians’ historical amnesia is certainly

not the only case of this kind of strategic forgetting. The example of the Holocaust and war-time experiences in Germany provide an interesting comparison. It took until the 1970s for Germans to begin to review and engage in discussion about the past. Indeed Collins and Davis place this cultural change in connection with the Mabo decision firmly within the international phenomena of memory, history and identity, where many countries are reviewing their shameful or contested histories.

Yet there are many questions that remain unanswered in the placing a shock motif at the centre of historical conjecture. On the face of it, the overriding sense I have is of disbelief that the tragic results of dispossession occurred, seemingly without comment, so I suppose there is some shock in that. But since people did know what occurred and have discussed it in a public sense in the early years of the colonies, in parliamentary discussions of laws relating to the gathering of indigenous people onto reserves or more recently, at least since W.E.H. Stanner's 1968 Boyer Lectures, in what sense can it be said that there was historical amnesia? Paul Gilroy provides a comment relevant to this case, referring to Jean Amery's reflections on racial science and exclusionary practices. "These were not to be transcended by dialectical or any other means. They were to be passionately preserved, worked upon, and actively remembered so that they could guard against the inevitable future perils that simplistic innocent notions of progress just simply cannot entertain" (91).

This is not to imply that Collins and Davis are advocates of progress, but explaining this seeming historical amnesia in terms of a theory of shock seems reductionist, and appears to fall into the very trap of obscuring rather than revealing and consciously remembering this colonialist dynamic. At times the way the theoretical material is applied also seems forced; for example Collins and Davis refer often to the present in the past which is represented in the films they examine although this, presumably does not accord with the theory of shock and discontinuity they espouse. Nor do they define the distinction between history and memory, and this leads to a blurring

between history and one of the forms of memory they use – historical memory.

Collins and Davis refer to Thomas Elsaesser's concept of "erfahrung" – embodying cinema as a space for personal experience that may be used as the starting point for public political discussion. This is derived from the space of viewing for German films which spoke to their audiences in new ways about topics on which public discussion had been silenced. But it occurred in the 1970s, whose milieu was completely different to the present. A precisely similar process cannot occur in the present Australian context. This leaves open the question of what defines the ways films which address cultural changes after Mabo are constructed and situate themselves in terms of public spaces. Collins and Davis answer this productively in terms of individual analyses, but less systematically in a general sense. Yet by associating the materials they do and reviewing a large body of films, they open out this area for discussion. One site where they address this question to some degree is in the second chapter, where they discuss the ways in which Australian films construct and project themselves both nationally and internationally in terms of industrial and institutional contexts.

The authors usefully link many fields, including present day filmmaking and its antecedents in 1970s filmmaking about the nation. An extremely useful link is that made in the second chapter between a cinema, seen in terms of a national social imaginary and the international or global perspective within which Australian cinema may be perceived as a genre. There is a useful analysis of three films, *Moulin Rouge*, *The Dish* and *Lantana*, describing how each of these films place themselves strategically as a part of this genre in both the local and the international sphere and their relative success in doing so.

The film readings are fresh and perceptive. The discussion of Phil Noyce's *Rabbit-proof Fence*, Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* and Sue Brookes' *Japanese Story* are cases in point. A wide range of sources are brought into play, for example, literary analyses of lost children narratives for *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, and this demonstrates the scope of the work. However I whilst I enjoyed the generous

tone of the film analyses, at times I would have preferred a more critical approach; for example *Rabbit-proof Fence* is presented largely in the light of disagreements between neo-conservatives and left-liberals. It fails to take account of some quite stringent criticism of the narrative and the Hollywood techniques of emotional identification used by Noyce¹. Although Collins and Davis discuss *Japanese Story* cogently in their consideration of its depiction of grief, it leaves open the question of how the representation of a mature grief and reparation in this film can be linked with a national sense of failure that recognises indigenous trauma, when the film overtly concerns the relationship between an Australian woman and a Japanese man. And this brings to mind the criterion of how conscious this work of reviewing history is in contemporary Australian film. The readings this study works with refer to films that do not always directly take up the theme of cultural change after Mabo, but function to rework icons of Australian film such as the desert and the laconic outback hero, as well as those that do. Given that historical amnesia and silencing have been features of Australian history and belonging, and their depiction in cinema, this invites a discussion of why such topics are often treated so tangentially.

The value of the book lies in the film readings and the way in which the book gathers these together. The backtracking over icons this entails, leads in the final section to an exploration of trauma, grief-work and coming of age. This provides a powerful representation of the work these films undertake in renewing the past and a potential way forward to a maturing national identity through both acknowledging indigenous trauma and its expression and undertaking the work of feeling a way through the sense of shame and grief invoked for whites.

Collins' and Davis' book is an important work that draws together a body of films and a diverse body of theory to deal with them. The elements that are not always successful are the links between film, historical and cultural theories. The concept of shock is an attempt to mediate these fields, but, in my view is more like wishful thinking. However in making the numerous links between disparate fields in the way that it does to

form a broad picture of a cultural phenomenon and its cinematic expression, the book breaks new scholarly ground and provides a foundation for further work in this important area, both in filmmaking and film studies.

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Notes

¹ See Tony Hughes D'aeth "Which Rabbit-Proof Fence? Empathy, Assimilation, Hollywood". *Australian Humanities Review*, 15 December 2003.
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