

**Chiara Minestrelli**

*Australian Film Culture, Identities, Texts.*

**Wimmer Adi, 2007. "Australian Film Cultures, Identities, Texts", in Focal Point vol.7, Trier (Germany): WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag. Pages: 209. Prezzo: 25,50 Euro. ISBN: 978-3-86821-004-0.**

Adi Wimmer's book *Australian Film, Cultures, Identities, Texts* (2007), represents an important move towards a full recognition of the originality and peculiarity of Australian culture by exploring a variety of dimensions in the country's cinematographic production. Using Monaco's words, Wimmer reminds us of the fact that films have "the power to explain the structure of society to us" (2007: 4). In a similar way, Adi Wimmer's study sheds light on emblematic aspects of society filtered through their cinematic representations. The author's scrupulous observations are conveyed in fluent and involving narrative style; the argumentation captures different aspects of the same subject thanks to a clever game of questions and answers and an appealing way of presenting critical theories about Australian movies and their features. Mixing analytic writing, sharp reflections and a fascination for cinema, Wimmer discusses each topic in such a clear academic prose that it can be understood also by non-experts.

The book consists of ten chapters made up of individual essays structured to describe, analyse and interpret the nature of contemporary Australian film production. The author's intent appears clear from the outset: he calls Australian Films into question by contextualizing and problematizing them from a historical and artistic point of view. Chapters 1 and 2 are therefore devoted to a detailed overview of the film industry's history from its pioneering days, which, the author remarks, pre-date Hollywood.

Chapter 2, focuses on the cultural factors underlying the different 'eras' analysed, investigating and highlighting the impact of economy and politics on culture in general and film in particular.

In chapter 3 the author undertakes a journey through the complex and multi-faceted cultural map of Australia in relation to other countries; especially 'mother-England'. Australia's efforts reached their peak in some of the most representative films in the country's history. The movie *Heritage* (1935), joins the ranks of the greatest celebrative films on Australian past, but fails to be truly symbolic of Australian culture as it attempts to conceal the phenomenon of convictism. However, the 'collective borderline syndrome' Australia developed in the early 1920s, due to the detachment from England, leads to a series of 'ennobling' movies which try to remove that 'feeling of inadequacy' typical of Australian citizens in those times.. The so-called 'Period movies' mentioned in the book - *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), *Breaker Morant* (1980) - are considered a way to foreground Australian history and culture, according to Wimmers's view.

Chapter 4 and 5 share the same aim to explore the everlasting conflict between culture and nature, bush and city. Australian collective psyche has been undermined by the rooted anxiety over the evocative, but threatening outback, which 'swallows up' people and nourishes ancestral fears. As a matter of fact, the writer says, reporting Henry Lawson's words in *The Drover's wife*, "there is no symbiotic relationship between culture and nature in the outback, but a kind of war. [...] A total war" (2007:84).

Chapter 6 leaves behind the strained search for a national identity and offers an alternative to the Australian 'bushman stereotype' and his Anglo-Celtic community. Australia's social fabric underwent a deep change in the 1990s and the film industry witnessed this phenomenon in a penetrating way. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Australia's moral code was experiencing a new phase: a broad-minded model of sexuality started to attract the public and become popular within

a country which was trying to abandon its chauvinist mentality. *Priscilla, Queen of the desert* (1994) embodies this new atmosphere and shows Australian people a different, but respectable way of being tolerant.

Chapter 7 analyses one of the most critical ethnic issues in the country's collective consciousness: the controversial relationship between Australia and its friend-foe Asia. Asia's representations in Australian drama and movies have always been accompanied by a sense of displacement and fear of the 'Other', especially when considering Asian role in Australian history. As Wimmer points out, one of the rare examples of Asian presence in the Australian film industry is the Chinese-Australian director Clara Law, who played a crucial part in presenting the Oriental culture on the big screen.

Chapter 8 investigates diversity on the basis of Australian new multicultural awareness and the issue of immigration: trauma, fear, escape, acceptance, assimilation, diversity are all presented as a reflection of Australia's behaviour within the 'Anglocentric' paradigm. The journey continues through the description of movies such as: *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997) and *Gould's Book of Fish* (2002). Along with Wimmer's plan to intertwine issues and chapters, we can see how the increasing attention of film-makers towards the outback can be explained in the light of Australia's sense of guilt for abandoning the land. The last chapter picks up the thread of what has been said previously by describing the continuing obsession with nature and rural settings. *The Farm* (2000), *Love Serenade* (1996), *The Dish* (2000), *The Mullet* (2001) and *The Tracker* (2002) depict an image of a deep love of the land but, at the same time, of unconscious repulsion. This stimulating and vivid collection of essays charts a detailed cultural map of Australia and its cinema from its beginning until now. The writer has taken a variety of approaches to analyse the appeal and complex nature of Australia's film production and gives the reader the tools to appreciate its uniqueness.

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