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The Man From Snowy River and Australian Popular Culture

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For years there have been debates over the 'kangaroo western' as a film production strategy. In a 1976 PDGA seminar P. P. McGuinness and Hal McElroy spoke against it. 'Quality' 'intelligent' movies like *Picnic* and Caddie were, they said, the way to crack the overseas market. Other members of the industry lamented that they could not get a kangaroo western off the ground. There was, they argued, a prejudice against it, and by implication against entertainment.

To many, the kangaroo western is *The Man From Snowy River*. It is alive and well - and it is 'entertainment', 'commercial' and 'Hollywood'. But Tony Ginnane was not its producer. Richard Franklin was not its director. Everett de Roche was not its scriptwriter. Only one figure associated with last year's proposed 'de-Ozification' of Australian film is involved: Simon Wincer as executive producer.

The crucial creative figures are Geoff Burrowes and George Miller. Their background - and they are proud of this - is in Australian television, principally in Crawfords. And Crawfords is, in comparison to the 'international film', about as 'Australian' in cultural production as you can get. Miller the director has impeccable television credentials. He was a director on *The Sullivans*, on Ian Jones/Bronwyn Binns'*Against The Wind*mini-series, and on the ill-fated but interesting Grundy police series *Bellamy*. These kind of credentials have not counted for much in the feature industry up to now. With the extraordinary success of *The Man*, they will.

That they have counted for so little is an historic accident due in large part to the intransigence towards feature films of Douglas McClelland as Minister for the Media, 1973-75. That intransigence allowed film to be separated from the Media portfolio and thus from television, and put under the wing of the Prime Minister's Department. The problem was compounded by the separation in the Tariff Board Report (1973) of the feature film and television industries and the emergence of the Australian film industry as a possibility from the interstices of a cultural institution, the (then) Australian Council for the Arts. The latter was predisposed to valorise the feature film as art form, rather than television serial drama.

All these factors contributed to a separation of the feature film from existing Australian television. That television - Crawford's police series *Homicide*, Cash/Harmon's *Number 96* - was cast in the devil's clothes. It was crude, unsophisticated, uncreative. It was not, in short, what the new Australia - an Australia equipped with cultural capacities by the unprecedented expansion in arts expenditure in the Whitlam years - needed. After it was discovered that Australian television was not particularly au fait with this project of 'upgrading' its fare, the feature film became the golden boy. It would lead the chase after, the race to catch up with style and form in the rugged and inhospitable terrain of Australian culture. Film and television have gone their separate ways since.

That is, until recently. *Cinema Papers* began to expand its coverage to television. The mini-series phenomenon with its 'masterpiece', 'art', 'quality' television connotations amongst producers, directors and audiences alike became a minor though grudgingly accepted member of the art fraternity. It was not surprising then, that with the advent of the tax incentive scheme, the mini-series should have been included with feature films for dispensations. The industries were being brought closer together. This shift made possible Miller's and Burrowes' sideways move into feature production with *The Man From Snowy River*.

*The Man* has no precedent in recent Australian feature production. I stress recent advisedly. The film-makers' admiration for Ken Hall's Cinesound features of the 30s, and Hall's open admiration for their achievements, indicates another earlier Australian film-making that this film could be compared to; but that's curiosity-shop stuff.

*The Man's* phenomenal success owes itself to a more modern reality. It is getting to the cinema the same audience that makes*Cop Shop, A Country Practice, The Sullivans* and *A Town Like Alice* rating successes on Australian television. So too, given its remarkable success, it is getting the same audiences that made *Star Wars* the highest grossing film in the Australian theatrical market.

The criticisms levelled at *The Man* - its 'poor' script, its 'commerciality', its Hollywood overtones, its poor depiction of rural,Australia - tell us a lot about Australian film criticism, but very little about the film and its phenomenal success. What the Australian feature film should be, in film criticism's cultural margins is fairly clear. There should be verisimilitude, 'real characters', identifiable situations. This call was first made loudly in 1948-49 with the success of*The Overlanders*. Its circulation was as an art film. The nascent film society movement took it up to beat on the head the Ken Hall and Chas Chauvel models of Australian film-making then current. Here, they argued, was a culturally acceptable form of Australian feature film-making. Then the basic model for a genre of film criticism which persists till today was outlined. This criticism praised an episodal, anecdotal film-making with 'real', 'ordinary', 'believable', basically 'nice' people. The dramaturgy of the ordinary, the everyday and the familiar was constructed. The heroes/heroines were not Heroes - and only incidentally heroic.

For this critical apparatus, The Man was a failure. In its disjunctions, its clichŽs bordering on the camp, its hamming-up, its firm situation with the genres of film and television (a structuring which made available readings which went easily from the camp to the ingenue) - it was obviously not a 'well made' film.

There is however a sneaking suspicion that its spell, the pleasure that audiences obviously draw from the film, has to do, somehow, with the fact of that poor script, that staginess, those touching animal clichés like a thousand movies before it. The response by two girls at the Perth premiere is a case in point:

Oh it made me so proud to be Australian . . . it was the elements of honesty in the script. . . When Spur gives him the horse, and he said, 'thank you Spur', you obviously felt he meant it. He wasn't a smarty arse. 1

They were appreciating, as Geoff Burrowes, the producer, was quick to point out, the very scenes that critics had lambasted as being banal and evidences of poor scripting. But of course this is not to say that the film is simple. It is not. It is Just not operating according to the conventions of and expectations as to what constitutes a well-made film that works through the reviews of *Cinema Papers, The Bulletin, The Age, National Times and the Courier Mail*.

Indeed, but perhaps the most obvious thing about *The Man* is the attention present at every moment, discernible in every frame, to the script. I was not surprised that it had undergone something like two dozen rewrites.

Its producer and director, Ken Hall and the industry, all call it a 'commercial film' - a film made not for critics, but for money; not to convey a message, but to entertain. So the rhetoric goes. We can be sucked into this only too easily; regard the film as an expression of its commercial philosophy, see it as imitative in a bad sense, dismiss it as if it had no significant structures, regard its commercial success as a 'con' engineered by the Edgely Organisation with its western fashion accessories and capacity for hype.

There is perhaps some political sense in making these criticisms. Its success does not help the cause of what is usually designated as the more non-commercial, *personal* and *independent* section of the industry and Australian film culture which Filmnews so effectively represents and promotes. The example of *The Man* - when and if followed - will put pressure upon the continuation of other kinds of film-making for commercial release. But *The Man* has been and continues to be extraordinarily successful. It looks like achieving the unprecedented position in our film history of being the first Australian film to occupy the number one position in box office revenues in the Australian market. The terrain *The Man* inhabits is that of the cigarette commercial, clothes fashions, real estate, tourism, soap opera (melodrama), bush dancing, John Ford and John Wayne. In other words the film is firmly situated within Australian popular culture. The 'fictive space' of Australia and the locale that the film calls upon is one formed in and informed by television, the press and radio; rather than the stage, existing Australian feature films, or, god forbid, literature.

There is certainly a commercial dimension to *The Man*. But that commercial dimension - the rodeo circuit, bushwalking, country and western music, c & w radio stations, hobby farms, the escalation in property values in places like Lismore, Gosford, Tambourine, Noosa, Cairns, Port Douglas - is not possible without it creating its own discourses, its own significative spaces.

*The Man* is not a reassertion of the pioneer legend A. B. Paterson attempted to create. The Man is self-consciously a spectacle film with a flagrant disregard of the values and perceptions of the times. Harrison rails against feminism. Jim talks in the language of animal liberation when he breaks in the colt from Old Regret. Clancy admonishes the predatory Harrison in terms that make sense only within an ecological frame of reference.

The 'significations' are not those of the nostalgia film. Its time is not that of a lost, irretrievable, communal past, but of a present. The bush is not alien, foreign, mysterious, uncolonisable, predatory or revengeful; it is a commercial, ecological, desirable, pleasurable, traversable, and indeed acquirable space.

Two stories of *The Man's* popularity stand out in my mind. A policeman recently drove seventy miles from the provincial city of Rockhampton to the port of Gladstone in central Queensland to take his girlfriend to see *The Man*at the local drive-in. It was his fourth attendance, her first. They arrived back at her flat early. He did not want to 'ruin' the experience by watching the supporting feature as well.

A radio station in Queensland's central highlands advised patrons of the local drive-in from neighbouring towns to book, so that they would not be turned away. Many had been turned away at the previous weekend's screening. Booking would save them an unnecessary long trip to the drive-in.

In both these cases the audience is not principally a pastoral one. Gladstone is a port - an industrial city with coal and grain loaders, an aluminium smelter, a cement plant which supplies most of Queensland, a giant power house and rents the equal of Sydney's. The central highlands is an agricultural and coal mining area. This 'country' audience, like its metropolitan counterpart, has no practical use for horses. They do, however, have a leisure-industry use for horses and horse riding, a real estate interest in a place in the country, and so on.

It would be naive to consider the presale of the film as centred solely on the over-familiar poem. Its success is as much due to its capacity to articulate and be articulated within a 'public', 'market' imagination and use for the 'bush' and 'horses'. The emergence, within metropolitan and provincial cities the length and breadth of Australia, of country-and-western in the last few years has been staggering. There are c & w stations in all the major state capitals. They consistently get large audiences. The marketing and push for western gear has coincided with this development. R. M. Williams' opening up shops in Sydney and Melbourne is symptomatic. A range of western gear shops are prominent in new suburban shopping complexes across Australia. On the outskirts of every metropolitan and provincial city area are numerous riding schools and, of course, the ubiquitous hobby farms. Horses are a reason for having a hobby farm. Many do not have gardens, but you can bet your life they have a couple of horses and cows. Concomitant to this 'urbanised rural' explosion has been the development and successof the radio circuit; a success used to sell the Castlemaine-Toohey's XXXX beer in Queensland, to provide numerous specials on television Australia wide, and to sell, construct and package *The Man From Snowy River*.

The presence and fact of this market were clearly realised by Edgley. 'Snowy River' became a brand name for a line of western gear and accessories. The film was sold in stores and on these radio stations in a way that we would have to go back to the Hollywood 'women's films' of the 30s to see repeated.

The ability of the film to tap into this massive presence in a way that other Australian films, set in the past with their older audience appeal have not been able to manage, is not just a function of the Edgley organisation's publicity and marketing presence. The film came in a form digestible to these and other audiences. The Man was not at odds with the representations, the mythologies which make a place in the country, the bush, horses and horse riding, western gear, desired and desirable realities for a great many people across the whole population.

For this market/audience/film the bush is not, as so much Australian Kultural writing would have it, a metaphysical space. White Australians in *The Man* are not 'Europeans'. They are not 'intruders in the bush'2. Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture do not provide the keys to an experience of and an Austro-European coming into consciousness of/with the Australian landscape. Nature is not hermeneutic here. Any experience, consciousness is given already. European settlement is registered, not as the raping of the landscape, but as a fact. Further it is *Australian* and not European. There is no European gentility to be incorporated or overcome in this film. The settlers are not fighting against the bush. They are not maintaining and retaining in a ridiculous fashion their Europeanism in a hostile, alien environment. They are quite simply there and they manifestly belong there. Ecological discourses, usually so associated with these notions to their detriment, are not however absent. The mountains, says Jack Thompson's Clancy, should remain off limits to the predatory Harrison (Kirk Douglas).

The space that *The Man* inhabits quite simply eludes the grasp of Australian Kultural discourses. That 'intellectual' writing which feeds, sustains and finances an intellectual sub-culture in Australia with its nonsense about an unauthentic Australian culture and an 'alien' threatening landscape has no purchase in this film. Neither does *The Man*have any of that European gentility/Australian vulgarity opposition, which has marked so much postwar Australian cultural criticism and films.

The bush is not that to which a self-conscious metropolitan consciousness goes. It is not what is separate from the film-maker, that the film-maker tries to experience, to know, to come to terms with, to be at one with from the outside. It is available already. A day's drive will take you there. A horse ride will bring you closer to it. It is not alien although it is unfamiliar.

This availability of the bush and the mountains as space is illustrated by the film-makers themselves. Mansfield is where the producer Geoff Burrowes' wife's parents live. It simply cannot be the space where narrow-minded, inbred Deliverance-type hillbillies or Wake In Fright monsters live. It is not a dramatic space in which a city sophistication resilience, rightmindedness and liberal morality are tested. The film could well have been that. It is after all common legend that down around the Snowy, as in parts of Tasmania, they are all a bit 'inbred'. The film does play on this popular knowledge. 'Jim is all right but... you know, he is a mountain boy.' That is a mark of the plain's intolerance rather than an accurate description of the mountain people.

*The Man* resembles an earlier Australian film-making in its treatment of the 'mountain men'. Diverse and important film-makers like Longford, Hall, Chauvel, Watt and the much neglected John Heyer (*Back Of Beyond*) reserved a special place in their drama for the 'outback folk'. They were not in this tradition, the vicious, nasty, racist, ugly, predatory people of *Wake In Fright* nor were they the European style peasantry of *My Brilliant Career* and*Picnic*. They were variously simple, naive, dignified, affectionate, likeable and resilient. The drama in this film-making was, particularly in the wake of *The Overlanders*, the maintenance of community and sensibility under 'harsh', even extraordinary (I would-not-have-liked-it- otherwise) conditions. The television drama *A Town Like Alice* recalls*Back Of Beyond* exactly in this regard. The narrative is not a platform to mark the characters' traversal to maturity, in a loss of innocence accompanied by an often explicit, geographic journey from the rural to the city and overseas, in the Australian nostalgia film. *The Man* simply cannot be read as 'determined to resist the encroachment of an alien culture'.3 People are there already doing the inhabiting. It is not a false, nor a necessarily exploitative habitation, but an organic, desirable one. In the dispersal of 'country developments' from Cooktown to Devonport an urban clientele does not, for instance, feel guilt over dispossession, nor does it see the landscape as a threat. On the contrary it is a haven. A place to get away from it all. So too, riding, like jogging, is recreational, and healthy. 'Holiday farms' are a 'healthy' organic alternative to the beach motel at the Gold Coast as a leisure alternative. 4

The mountains in *The Man* function complicity. They are used economically, but not principally. They are objects of contemplation and appreciation in their own right. They are a nice exciting place to be. This is what Jessica discovers. for Jim they are, more particularly, the only place to be. Jim Craig's aspiration is to earn the right, acquire the capital so to speak, to return there: to go home and be at home. The mountains are that which the characters use, traverse, consume, and appreciate:

. . . the scenery being so beautiful makes people proud to belong to a continent that is so pretty. 5

Jim is Jessica's means to enter a 'lost world' of enchantment.

The horses themselves have significance like that of the mountains. Horses are something to be ridden, sold, tamed, domesticated, made friendly, boiled down to wax, appreciated, anthropomorphised. They are good and bad. In this too, the leisure industry is complicit: horses have to be safe to ride; the pleasure is in riding and watching riding, not in their running wild. An unbroken or erratic horse is a liability even at a rodeo: $50 for a dogger and no more. It is pet food. Horses are of use in relation to people. They are a social currency. 'Horseness' in and of itself, is not 'kangarooness': something to be left alone in its natural habitat. They are a vehicle for the acquisition and circulation of nature. The horse is an intermediary between the civilised lowlands and the 'natural' highlands of the mountains.

Horses too have always been complicit accessories to man/woman. A horse is the means by which Jessica gains access to the 'mountains' and Jim. The film-makers make this point about the narrative utility of horses with a really delicious banality:

Since it's people who go to films and not horses, we decided to come down rather squarely on the side of people winning and not horses. 6

*The Man* consciously and explicitly registers fragments of present day political discourse. Feminism, ecology, animal liberation - arguments over the correct forms of education and training with Spur's and Harrison's treatment of Jessica, and Jim's gentle treatment of the colt and Curly's brutal one. All these elements are acknowledged, assigned a place, but not resolved. Their presence is seen as, and does function as, a set of hooks into the film for a variety of audiences. The film-makers themselves saw their audience as the 'whole of Australia'. But to reach that whole of Australia they did not go about addressing some sort of unified national character. Instead they constituted diverse publics and then worked to provide something for each of them. Parents, kids, those who never go to the cinema, cineastes, adolescents of both sexes, were all parts of this public to be provided for. The film bears the marks of this selection. *The Man* was able to have and be given both naive and ironic readings. What appeared plausibly and appreciatively as kitsch and quotation appeared to other audiences as something real, new, genuine. In this The Man bears comparison with *The Raiders of the Lost Ark and Star Wars.*

Despite this internal differentiation, a kind of cumulative sensibility and unanimism was achieved and intended. The playing of Waltzing Matilda, as Jim arrives back at his home in the mountains, addresses the audience as Australian.

The feeling we wanted to generate in the audience when Jim beat those horses, and 'alone and unassisted brought them back' was that similar to a team winning the grand final, twenty players don't win it - hundreds of thousands of people win it. When Jim beats the horses, everyone in the audience wins. 7

The horns tooting at the drive-in, theatre audiences clapping, the Rockhampton cop seeing it for the fourth time all provide ample evidence that the attempt was successful. It remains, as A Town Like Alice was before it, a rare public ritual. In the city cinema, Paddington sits next to Blacktown; Inala next to Indooroopilly, the decrepit next to the nubile. Ken Hall blesses the film and we are back in the heady days of his *On Our Selection*(1932). That film ran thirty years doing the rounds of theatres in Australia. Like *The Man* it is popular family entertainment without a 'kultural' or (despite Kirk Douglas' presence) an 'international' alibi.

Undoubtedly, the effects of *The Man's* success will be far reaching. The integration of feature production with television will accelerate. Already the differences between the mini-series and the feature film are being reduced, both critically and for film personnel themselves: look at the combination of 'feature' and 'television' directors in the*Women Of The Sun* project or the critical reception of *A Town Like Alice.*

Whether, in a time of economic recession, this closes off other avenues of film production remains to be seen. One thing is for certain though. *The Man* is tied into Australian popular culture in a way that few Australian films with their older, 'cultural', audience appeal have been before. It remains very much a film of the present.

Notes

*Filmnews*, September 1982

The girls were speaking to the producer Geoff Burrowes after the film's screening. Quoted in George Tosi, 'The Two Men Behind Snowy River, *Cinema Papers*, June 1982, p. 212.

*Intruders In The Bush* is the title of a collection of essays on 'The Australian Quest For Identity'. John Carroll (ed),*Intruders In The Bush*,Oxford University Press, Sydney 1982. The title is an indication of the book's overall theme. Australian culture is still an unauthentic, non-organic, intrusion rather than being an organic expression of an at oneness with Australia and the Australian. Following a long line of postwar cultural criticism coming to terms with the Australian environment is seen as the central problem for Australian culture upon which the 'quality' of Australian cultural production depends.

Jack Clancy, 'Film: The Renaissance Of The Seventies', *ibid*, p. 177.

These cultural discourses and land rights mythologies are quite simply not present. This does not mean they are negated or suppressed. They persist and exist on other horizons. Land Rights is, after all, 'up there', or if you live up there, 'out there' - in North Queensland, north-western Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It is of no direct relevance to the purchase of hobby farms or a place in the Blue Mountains,Tambourine or Lismore. The mining companies, the pastoral industry,the conservative rascist governments are not like us doing this purchase, riding these horses. They are other - them. The Aborigines are more like us wanting and having a right to their piece of land in the country.

Tosi, *op cit* p. 212.

*Ibid.*, p. 209.

*Ibid.*, p. 211.

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