

**Collins, Felicity; Davis, Therese, 2004. *Australian Cinema After Mabo*. Vii + 204 pp. ISBN 0 521 54256 -1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.  
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My personal interest in Australian film and in particular in its depiction of landscape directed me to Felicity Collins and Therese Davis' book *Australian Cinema After Mabo*. It raised my awareness to 'look at' the Australian landscape with respect to the *Mabo* High Court case in 1992 granting Native Title with different eyes. Moreover, this volume not only analyses Australian films of the 1990s and 2000s against this background, which caused a paradigm shift by invalidating the legal claim of *terra nullius* as well as within the framework of colonial history and memory on the one hand, but also in the light of processes of globalisation on the other. The book offers starting points for 'rethinking' Australian cinema in particular with respect to the criteria of shock, memory and recognition. As the authors state, the *Mabo* decision politicises Australian history and the task to rethink the country's colonial past and its race relations becomes inevitable as a prerequisite to deal with a 'morally illegitimate national identity', as Tim Rowse puts it (4). Nevertheless, Collins and Davis focus on the cultural rather than the political aspects of this

paradigm shift of Australian historical consciousness, which with respect to cinema has not been analysed yet. For the authors the term 'after *Mabo*' "implies a national cinema that, in various ways, tells us what it feels like to be living in the 'afterwardness' of colonialism during a moment of intense globalisation" (8). Questions revolving around being at home in Australia, the importance of legal justice and historical empathy, local and global strategies and the cinema's role in the construction of a national identity are being discussed. The authors' thesis is that cinema facilitates collective as well as intimate forms of recognition with a different impact compared to legal and political recognition. This approach is different to film theory's voyeuristic and fetishistic concepts of cinema. They relate to theories of memory and trauma cinema to find answers to the question "why these films now" (9)?

The authors base their analyses on a concept of 'aftershock' by which they mean the unresolved trauma of colonial settlement. The *Mabo* decision caused a paradigm shift regarding concepts of identity, the land and a sense of belonging concomitant with a paradigm shift of dealing with landscape in Australian cinema as it is the landscape tradition which linked national identity to British settlement of the land. The inward and backward-looking search for national identity of period films was replaced by the *Mabo* High Court decision that emphasised the complex role of landscape in national identity. With the realisation of the lie of *terra nullius* the landscape raises questions about historical amnesia, shock and memory, thus a familiar icon is seen from a new perspective. The spaces that realize the concept of aftershock are in particular spaces of everyday life and the desert landscape. Aftershock endures unlike shock which implies, according to Benjamin, flashes of recognition. Different modes of temporality are thus opposed. The term 'afterwardness' is used to describe historical conflicts and their effects on the present. A historical incident only becomes traumatic afterwards and is even intensified by neo-conservative movements, which are occupied with the past rather than trying to solve what the past means for the present.

Felicity Collins and Therese Davis have a lot of expertise both as film analysts and as scriptwriters/authors; the former lecturing in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University, the latter lecturing in Film and Cultural Studies at the University of Newcastle. The content of their book is structured into three parts: 'Australian Cinema and the History Wars' (chapters 1-4), 'Landscape and Belonging after *Mabo*' (chapters 5-7) and 'Trauma, Grief and Coming of Age' (chapters 8-10). The authors analyse a selection of films by predominately considering as key issues the ensuing commercial and cultural strategies of the Australian film industry deriving from the post-*Mabo* historical conflicts, the aftershock of the *Mabo* decision in connection with the landscape tradition in Australian cinema, the function of trauma and grief, the nation's process of coming of age and the stylistic devices of the narrative of defeat and comedy.

Chapter one 'Backtracking after *Mabo*' looks at how the past is used to refer to the present in the films *Black and White* (Craig Lahiff, 2002), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002) and in the television program *Chicks Talking* (Leah Purcell, 2002). These films are examples of a resumption of themes of national history and are analysed with respect to their interpretation of national history as politics of recognition and as traumatised public memory. The analysis of *Black and White* focuses on the film's representation of history as coherent remembrance and storytelling as epic memory. *The Tracker* deals with the struggle

for recognition. *Chicks Talking* explores the politics, identification and representation of Aboriginality by interviewing Aboriginal Australian women from various regions of Australia. Purcell's documentary highlights the contemporary trauma of Aboriginal identity as a result of historical dispossession. The idea followed is 'backtracking' national identity on well trodden paths but finding new directions.

Commercial-industrial as well as global-local strategies are exemplified in a comparison of the three films *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrman, 2001), *Lantana* (Ray Lawrence, 2001) and *The Dish* (Rob Sitch, 2000). *The Dish* is an example of an inward-looking film using familiar types and characters as well as a familiar landscape. *Moulin Rouge* is an example of the other end of the spectrum, an outward-oriented international film but shot and produced in Australia and depicting Australian actors. It aims to appeal to the global infotainment industry through its 'spectacular' digital effects, intertextuality and imaginary location. *Lantana* represents some form of middle-ground located in between 'global Hollywood' and local television. It makes use of an international genre, the thriller, and explores middle-class life in a cosmopolitan context but with an Australian 'flavour' (i.e. Sydney location). They are not explicit post-*Mabo* films but according to the authors a historical consciousness is provoked by alluding to an era of change, which in Andreas Huyssen's words can be called 'late modernity'. Explicit post-*Mabo* films are, for instance, *The Tracker*, *Black and White*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *One Night the Moon*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Beneath Clouds*, also dealt with in this volume. A shift between thinking of Australia as insular to an understanding of the country as culturally diverse, open and worldly has to take place, which will also be the basis for re-imagining Australian identity and implied Australian history. The idea of Australian cinema as being international is closely linked to this process.

The chapter on *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002) and *Walking on Water* (Tony Ayres, 2002) is concerned with 'aural images' aiming to illustrate a re-shaping of the Australian social imaginary springing from an Anglo-Celtic relocated origin. In *Australian Rules* neo-conservative ideas about national identity are contested in terms of 'new vernaculars'. So far prevailing core values of Australian national identity like egalitarianism, fair go and mateship are undermined. Nevertheless it is the white male's authorial voice that is heard at the end of the film. *Walking on Water* (described as "a film that might be understood as a long recovery party after a big night out at *Moulin Rouge*") is about people living with AIDS and regards a post-national identity as a temporary experiment. *Walking on Water* like *Lantana* and *Moulin Rouge* explore the sense of living in a globalised present in between a cosmopolitan lifestyle of transnational consumer culture on the one hand, and 'vernaculars', which are derived from the Anglo-Celtic social imaginary on the other. The theme of loss establishes a link between these films.

The book also contains a chapter on the biographical documentary *Mabo-Life of an Island Man* (Trevor Graham, 1997) to close a gap between the *Mabo*-decision (standing for the issue of Aboriginal land rights in general) and *Mabo* 'the man'. Part of its success lies in its depiction of 'intimate history' illuminating the significance of this historic judgement. The question of what intimate history is is also explored. The film is used as educational resource. It employs the trope of the face/defacement as a structuring device and as narrative theme.

The characters in *Heaven's Burning* (Craig Lahiff, 1997) (chapter five), a film that is critical of deregulated Australia, contradict the achievement of a multicultural society: the male hero takes the stereotype of the 'defeated male hero' a step further, he is even more passive. The *Last Days of Chez Nous* (Gillian Armstrong, 1992) is about the female protagonist's spiritual quest leading from the desert to the suburb. In *Holy Smoke* (Jane Campion, 1999) it is exactly the opposite. The quest is directed from suburban space to the desert landscape. *Last Days* thus reinforces the negation of the sacred unlike *Yolngu Boy*, *Serenades* and *The Missing*. Moreover, these films give different answers to Aboriginal identity located between history and modernity. In *The Missing* (Ron Howard, 2003), however, the protagonist, a Vatican priest, seeks an encounter with the Aboriginal 'spirit-world', which is projected onto the antipodean landscape by the European mind. Such a quest can be interpreted as an appropriation of Aboriginal values by settlers or as an expression of contemporary Australian spiritual convergence. These films illustrate that landscape is no longer a platform for European projections of a potential national origin. Its living history has to be realized.

The films discussed in chapter six, *Heartland* (TV series), *Cunnamulla* (Dennis O'Rourke, 2000) and *Message from Moree* (TV documentary) investigate the different meanings implied in the different words used for the Australian landscape like 'the country', 'the Bush', 'country', 'environment', 'from the country', and the projections and concepts these terms entail. So-called *terra nullius* films reinforce historical amnesia. They illustrate that an untranslatable or enigmatic element of the past remains, which also surfaces in Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives and understanding of the land. *Heartland*, for instance, deals with 'intersubjective space', a possible movement between 'our ways' and 'your ways'. In fact, the film explores the concept of Australia being an Aboriginal nation. In *Cunnamulla* the question of social identity and the singularity of the other is looked at, a question left open at the end of *Heartland*.

In chapter seven the authors identify two different groups of settlers. The first group comprises settlers claiming ancestry that goes back as far as 1788 and the second group consists of postwar migrants. Both groups are partial to selective historical amnesia, focussing on progress and the future rather than being concerned with Aboriginal ownership of the land. "Getting on with the future" is also the maxim in a number of films, located in urban environments ranging from city centres and suburbia to the beach. *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), for instance, explicitly makes reference to the *Mabo* decision. *Vacant Possession* (Margot Nash, 1995) overtly deals with the question of guilt and responsibility resulting from the injustices of the past. *Strange Planet* (Emma-Kate Croghan, 1999) illustrates the belatedness between an event and its understanding in a multi-strand narrative. *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998) contradicts the idea of an Aboriginal sense of intimacy with the land. The film rather raises the question of the possibility of an unanchored, post-indigenous identity, because the Aboriginal protagonists' beliefs in family values and the meaning of land and home have been shattered.

Chapter eight illustrates the controversial reviews of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002). It is an outward-looking film, making use of elements taken from the Hollywood genre and backtracking Australian national cinema at the same time. It also follows the tradition of Australian 'lost child films'. It becomes evident that 'country' is important for Indigenous people, physically and emotionally. On the one hand, the film recovers 'stolen

histories', but on the other, it highlights the traumatic dimension of the Stolen Generation by stating at the end that the heroine's daughter was also taken away from her and until her death they had not been re-united. In the epilogue filmed in documentary mode, the female protagonist Molly resumes control over the narration and addresses the audience as a survivor of the Stolen Generation. "In this way, the film is much more than a historical drama or romance-quest narrative or even a maternal melodrama. It is an instance of trauma cinema in which spectators are addressed as witnesses." (145)

*Looking for Alibrandi* (Kate Woods, 2000), *Head On* (Ana Kokkinos, 1998) and *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sven, 2002) are interpreted as coming of age films, which are also concerned with the relation between past and present. However, unlike other films of that genre they focus on the immediacy of the moment. The teenage protagonists of these films are united in their desire and mobility to escape history. However, this desire is not motivated by amnesia or denial of history but rather highlights how difficult 'coming of age' is in Australia and how a new way of dealing with the colonial burden of shame can be found. These films bring to light how traumas that have not been worked through prevent maturity. In *Beneath Clouds* the female protagonist literally escapes a (repetition of) history of violence. The protagonists of these films are 'objects of shame'. However, they suggest a repairing of the 'injuries' can occur by making these injuries visible and by showing empathy, which forms a stark contrast to John Howard's political stance. According to the authors the cinema in particular is able to create an intimate sphere of experience which can trigger emotions of empathy.

The final chapter reflects on the contemporary role of national Australian cinema. It is suggested that the act of mourning serves to achieve maturity with respect to a past one wishes to deny or forget. In order to reach a new perspective on national identity, backtracking though familiar ground, like the desert or the bush, is necessary as well as connecting its history to the present day, that is to say, a preoccupation with present pasts has to take place. *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003) as well as *Dreaming in Motion* (five short films commissioned by the Indigenous Unit of the Australian Film Commission and SBS Independent, 2002) are examples to illustrate the cinema's capacity for affective experience; they advocate 'grief-work' as a way to work through the trauma of historical amnesia. *Japanese Story* suggests a creative way of dealing with loss instead of its denial. In this film guilt is defined as something positive in the sense of taking responsibility and as an expression of regret. According to Collins and Davis habitual barriers can be transgressed through shock. *Japanese Story* thus depicts an outbreak of male melancholia which has been a main characteristic of the Australian outback film. With *Dreaming in Motion* Aboriginal perspectives to contemporary Australian cinema are given, which challenge the perspective of Aboriginal people as objects of the 'white gaze.'

By looking at a quite extensive selection of Australian films of the 1990s and 2000s and placing them in between the 'aftershock' of colonial history and the 'futureshock' of globalisation, *Cinema After Mabo* offers new perspectives of Australian movies following the landscape tradition in response to the *Mabo* High Court decision as a national shock of recognition. It is especially in the cinema where such a 'shock' can be realized. Each chapter analyses a selection of films against this background and the authors reasoning sometimes might seem redundant, but can also be seen as their well structured effort to constantly refer back to their hypothesis, and thus prove that their approach taken is viable. As historical

consciousness is a prerequisite for developing a postmodern identity, this book offers an Australian perspective to a task that need to be faced by all colonial settler societies.