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Victoria Herche: *The Adolescent Nation. Re-Imagining Youth and Coming of Age in Contemporary Australian Film*

Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter 2021. 252 pp. ISBN: 978-3-825-36918-7. EUR 54,00

Australian national identity is not fixed, it is ever-changing and always contested. Even the national anthem, in most countries a reasonably stable and secure symbol, has proven ephemeral in Australia. When Peter Dodds McCormick first penned 'Advance Australia Fair' in 1878 he called for "Australia's sons" to rejoice because they are "young and free". In 1984 the Hawke government changed the phallogocentric opening line to "Australians all". The anthem remained unchanged for nearly four decades before the Morrison government acknowledged the ancient history of Australia's First Nations and changed "young and free" to "one and free". It was not a mere cosmetic change. Australia's national identity has long been tied to the idea of youth. In 'The Adolescent Nation: Re-Imagining Youth and Coming of Age in Contemporary Australian Film', Victoria Herche traces the history of the enduring cinematic trope of youth and coming of age and links it to national identity in Australia. She contends that youth and coming of age has been "a defining narrative of Australia's national cinema" (15).

In film studies, the classic teen movie and coming of age stories are part of an established genre popularised by Hollywood in the 1950s, which has in turn influenced Australia. Broadly speaking, the films in Herche's study depict a transitional stage without meeting a particularly point of maturation. As such, she identifies an Australian filmic tradition with "coming of age as a dominant *narrative*, rather than a *genre*" (emphasis added, 26). Drawing on several theorists, Herche suggests that the filmic repetition of Australia coming of age is not a linear process to national maturity. Instead, the "transitional in-between phase" is "precisely" what constitutes Australian national identity (23). While the coming of age narrative in Australian film has been the subject of several academic works, Herche's book is original in its focus on culture and politics. As the author notes, "This book represents the first study that explores how, among others, Indigenous and refugee filmmakers are responding to the centrality of this [adolescent nation] theme" (27).

The structure of the book is unconventional but not to its detriment. In the first section, the history of the coming of age narrative in a range of mediums is mapped out. A full chapter is dedicated to the evolution of this narrative from the colonial period to the end of the twentieth century. The importance this tradition has for Herche is evident when we look at the front cover. It displays a cartoon image of "the little boy from Manly" from the 'Bulletin' magazine in 1913 rather than a movie still or poster. The next chapter is broadly chronological, focusing mainly on the coming of age narrative in film from the "New Wave"

era of the 1970s, through to the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. The second section continues the study into the twenty-first century but switches from a chronological to thematic layout with chapters on the following genres: road movie, crime, sports, romance, and musicals. While the structure may be jarring to some, for this reader it served the purpose of focusing attention on the tenacity of the narrative over time and away from the general evolution of filmic styles and tropes.

This book is focused on the intersection of film and national identity and asks important questions about how national stories are invented and told. A significant claim made by Herche is that Australia's image as an adolescent nation, with all the accompanying connotations of vulnerability, and dependency on a "mother-country" for guidance through this liminal stage, is not necessarily a limitation. She argues that film-makers have used national adolescence as an artistic springboard to reimagine Australian identity. Rather than being captive to a homogenous national image, Australian cinema has found agency in adolescence and has used it to reimagine what it means to be Australian.

The image of Australia as a child is tied to British imperialism and Indigenous erasure. Herche draws on post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha to note how imperial powers shape a narrative where the "new" nations have childlike qualities and are therefore dependent on the adult coloniser. Throughout the colonial era, Australians embraced the childhood metaphor, but it was one among several. Of the emerging nationalism in the leadup to Federation, Herche suggests that an identity was constructed that was "radically different from Britain" with innocent, young, and masculine icons (34). While this is true for the popular little boy from Manly cartoons, it is a stretch to say that gender was one of the key metaphoric descriptors. As John Hirst notes in the 'Sentimental Nation', Australia was more frequently represented as a young woman in the years before and after Federation. It was also common to see anthropomorphic representations of a young Australian kangaroo next to the mature British bulldog. Youth rather than gender is the common theme.

For this reader, the strongest chapter in the book is number 3 which explores the coming of age narrative from the 1970s to the early 2000s. It roughly coincides with a period James Curran and Stuart Ward have called 'The Unknown Nation', when the certainties of empire had retreated, and Australia rushed to find new symbols in a post-colonial world. Herche makes the important link between the Whitlam government's strong support for Australian film and "an emerging sense of national identity" (66) revealed both through comedy, such as 'The Adventures of Barry McKenzie', and through drama, such as 'Picnic at Hanging Rock'. Herche writes skilfully about both films which, despite their many differences, can be seen as two attempts to break the self-imposed "cultural cringe".

The chapter finishes strongly with a useful treatment of the depictions of multiculturalism and First Nations on film. While multiculturalism became government policy in the 1970s under Whitlam, Herche suggests that the "multicultural moment" in film came in the 1990s and 2000s where films such as 'Wog Boy' and 'Head On' presented ethnic stereotypes as part of Australian youth culture. Similarly, the 1992 Mabo decision had a gradual impact on film that can be identified more readily in the 2000s. Films such as 'The Tracker', 'Rabbit-Proof Fence',

and 'One Night the Moon', are all presented as part of the cultural legacy of the Mabo decision.

'The Adolescent Nation' has an unconventional structure, and this extends to the final chapter. The book finishes with one last case study in a chapter pithily titled "Instead of a Conclusion" (207). Discussing 'Jasper Jones' by First Nations director Rachel Perkins, Herche takes the opportunity to reiterate many of her previous points about the coming of age narrative, primarily the agency that it can give artists to challenge the homogenous image of a "typical" Australian.

Herche's book makes an important contribution to our knowledge of Australian film and the coming of age narrative that features so prominently within its cinematic tradition. It will be required reading for scholars of film history and of some interest to scholars of Australian national identity more generally. It is clearly aimed at a specialist audience and lengthy theoretical foregrounding may deter a more general readership. Nevertheless, this is a valuable addition to the academic literature on Australian film with several important insights into the intersection of national cinema and national identity.