

Jane Landman: *The Tread of the White Man's Foot. Australian Pacific Colonialism and the Cinema, 1925-62.* Pandanus Books (Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University), 2006. vii +268 pp. A\$ 34.96. ISBN 1 74076 206 1.

Reviewed by **Franz Kuna, Universität Klagenfurt.**

For reasons of defence (against Asian powers and European expansionist interests), the exploration of resources and, last but not least, national self-realisation Australia devoted considerable political energy, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the colonisation of what used to be called 'the

attainable Pacific' - territories that were either politically vulnerable or not yet colonised by European powers. Jane Landman's study concerns itself with Australia's colonialist engagement with the Torres Strait, Papua and New Guinea in the context of Australia's early belief in the powerful role of culturalist propaganda for purposes of achieving desired political aims. Australia's cinematic engagement with 'available' Pacific territories is an early example of the involvement of a whole cultural industry, above all the cinema, in the business of underwriting the (political) wisdom of annexing desirable territories. By supporting the Pacific colonialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Australia's film and cultural politics make an early start with what later, since the 'revival' period of the seventies, became the declared policies of the arts in Australia: to provide the *raison d'être* and icons for the business of identity quests and nation building - in Stuart Cunningham's words, to adopt a "second-order" role in support of more or less problematical political agendas (Landman 3).

During the interwar years of the last century Australia was battling with three major problems: the consolidation of the young Commonwealth, the gradual emancipation from the motherland (including Britain's colonial activities in the Pacific) and the quest for national identity through more or less peaceful visions (the Coral Sea as 'a Queensland lake') and protectionist policies. A curious mix of political, economic, social and culturalist discourses was applied to such acts as the annexation of Torres Strait islands in the late nineteenth century and the incorporation of Papua and New Guinea (a British colony from 1888 until 1906) as an Australian protectorate after Federation. All these colonialist acts were accompanied by a rhetoric of appeasement borrowed from such notions as 'the white man's burden' or the apparently desired 'tread of the white man's foot', and colonial administrations went as far as seeing in these acts a possibility to prevent the injustices perpetrated against Aborigines and "to earn expiation" from "the rest of the world".

Between 1925 and 1957 thirteen Australian films were produced that were set in the Pacific, all designed to support, in various degrees, the colonial project. Landman's study focuses on eight of these films, including one time favourites such as *Jungle Woman* (1926), *Hound of the Deep* (1926) *Lovers and Luggers* (1937), *King of the Coral Sea* (1954) or *Walk into Paradise* (1956). She presents her involved topic, versions of 'colonial cinema' from interwar to postwar, in three sections. The first section is devoted to "the social regulation of cinema exhibition in Australia in the context of the racialised national and imperial concerns driving the charged public arguments of the interwar years" (16), tracing these concerns into Australia's administration of Papua and New Guinea until the early 1960s.

The section also contains an exhaustive treatment of the policies and practices of cinema censorship for indigenous audiences from the 1920s to 1962 against the background of “the colonial administration’s conflict with commercial filmmakers over the role of cinema in the ‘colonial project’ and the Department of Territories’ subsequent commissioning of its own documentary production” (17). – Section Two considers Australian ‘South Seas’ productions of the ‘imperial’ interwar years, focusing on Frank Hurley’s ‘Empire cinema’, the early achievements of *Cinesound* (famous for its documentaries during World War II) and quite generally on the colonial and racial stereotypes of these films. However, the best of these South Seas productions not only display the unavoidable formulae of the imperialist ideology but also achieve a well-calculated balance of ‘generic’ and ‘documentary’ elements and a spectacular representation of native landscapes and peoples in their own right. The section concludes with an interesting discussion of the collaborative efforts at the time between commerce, the film industry, the Department of Territories and the Territory Administrations in order to minimise conflicts between production teams and politicians, conflicts which otherwise would have seriously undermined the attempt to persuade the cinema to serve the ‘colonial project’.

But to what extent, and in whose estimation, could the ‘colonial cinema’ (in itself a confusing and misleading enough term) be judged as furthering the colonial cause? Landman asks the crucial questions in the ‘Conclusion’ to her study: “How is that cause understood in the differing contexts of the colony, the nation (Australia) and Britain? How do such varying sites of reception inflect filmic meaning? Who is the implied audience of such cinema - the subject people of colonial regimes? A national, British, or other international audiences?” (227) Answers to these questions depend on the players to whom they are addressed. Whilst government agencies and cultural politicians will assume that artistic productions can be influenced and regulated in terms of desired political objectives, artists and producers tend to deny any such direct relationship between art and politics or use government rhetoric for the simple reason of gaining financial support. As Landman’s close analyses of the interrelationship of colonial governance, production and reception discourses, and similar approaches to the ‘revival period’ (the 70s), show it is not advisable to anticipate too close a relationship between policy thinking and the texts and critical discourses apparently resulting from it. Cultural policy is not in a position to produce desired cultural products just like that; it is not even able to set up inspiring frameworks for the production of texts or to “generate and inspire images, myths and narratives which can be seen to refract back to national audiences” (Cunningham, 97). This is not to say that policy thinking is useless. But its role, function and status needs to be redefined. Policy thinking needs to be thought of not so much in terms of an

applied cultural politics (with the ability of creating desired texts), but more in terms of an independent discursive formation with the purpose of contributing to the general need for expressing the 'political unconscious' of a specific period and (as far as critics and audiences are concerned) to provide a context for the understanding of the 'symptomatic' meaning of texts. In this respect policy is of more interest 'after the fact' than before it. Before it may either condition or alienate prospective sponsors and practitioners, at best it may motivate important social groups in the direction of desired cultural goals, but it will not in any way determine the direction of artistic developments, to say nothing of the production of individual works of art. Landman's study is both an exhaustive account of the interrelationship, even interdependence, of politics and art during a politically sensitive period - the change from colonialism to postcolonialism - and an important contribution to cultural studies methodology: the question of how to combine the analysis of political agendas with policy, production and reception studies in order to tease out meaning as complex as the ideological implication of art.

Bibliography

Stuart Cunningham (1992): *Framing Culture. Criticism and Policy in Australia*.
Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
