

book review

Diasporic Hybridity on Australian Screens

OLIVIA KHOO

MONASH UNIVERSITY

Catherine Simpson, Renata Murawska and Anthony Lambert (eds)

Diasporas of Australian Cinema

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The cultural diversity of Australian films, while a fixture on our screens, is not often remarked upon in any depth, save for studies of individual (usually commercially successful) films and directors. This is in marked contrast to the high-profile public commentary on race relations and ethnic tensions between Australia's immigrant groups.

Catherine Simpson, Renata Murawska and Anthony Lambert have put together a volume that addresses a gap in existing scholarly publications on Australian cinema. While international engagement with questions of diaspora and cinema has been gaining in recent years, notably in Hamid Naficy's *Accented Cinema* and Laura U. Marks's *The Skin of the Film*, Australia has somewhat lagged in this area.¹ This volume is unique in being the first to cover the breadth of interests that the term 'diaspora' can be applied to in the cinema, and in particular it details the

role various diasporic groups have played in Australian cinema's historical and industrial formation.

The editors are explicitly not concerned with demarcating what is 'diasporic' about Australian cinema from a more general designation of 'international cinema' but prefer to regard diasporic cinema as a 'loose category that is not overly prescriptive in definition'. (17) This lack of definitional clarity is both in the service of, and somewhat detracts from, the overall coherence of the volume. A strength is that it enables the volume to be expansive and inclusive, covering the breadth and genuine diversity of Australian cinema. It is also a weakness in that the definitional laxness becomes noticeable in the lack of coherence of some of the chapters.

In setting out their theoretical framework in the introduction, the editors note multiculturalism's demise as official state policy but its continued reflection in the cinema. They also remark upon the shift from the notion of Australia as a multicultural society to a country of diasporic collectives, allowing them to employ diasporic hybridity as a central organising concept of the book. An important question emerging from the use of the framework of diasporic hybridity is how to place Indigenous representations, films and filmmakers. In agreement with Tom O'Regan's comments on this issue, the editors note that using diaspora as a dominant conceptual framework can either elide the Indigenous experience or lead to Indigenous Australians being referred to incorrectly as a 'diasporic peoples'. (18) The editors neatly avoid elaboration by stating, 'the subsection of Australian cinema that can loosely be categorized within a diasporic framework is the focus of this book'. (19) This side-stepping, however, becomes untenable in subsequent chapters which continue to refer to Aboriginal Australians as part of a discussion of immigrant diasporic groups without clear qualification of the distinctions. More could have been done in the introduction to set out parameters for the conceptual framework the editors refer to as 'diasporic'. This is especially so in a book that is both introductory yet detailed enough to be instructive to those familiar with the subject.

The volume is divided into three parts: Theories, Representations, and Filmmakers. Following the introduction in part one, Catherine Simpson provides further theorisation of the concept of diasporic hybridity through the lens of *Lucky Miles* (Michael James Rowland, 2007) and the genre of the diasporic (no) road

movie. Simpson suggests rightly that diasporic hybridity has manifested in specific ways in Australian cinema and therefore international studies cannot be easily transposed to the Australian context. Given the dominant model of government funding, which has regulated and institutionalised filmmaking, the diasporic experience in Australian feature films tends to be manifested through traditional modes of storytelling rather than through a predominant interest in form and style (as Hamid Naficy would suggest). Simpson sets out a taxonomy of 'six types of diasporic Australian film' for readers unfamiliar with the subject, noting that many of the directors listed are not or do not identify as diasporic. Nevertheless, the categories include some doubtful examples, including *Lucky Miles* and Khoa Do's *Footy Legends* (2006) in the section on 'wog comedies'. The category of 'experimental diasporic diversity' includes Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and Tracey Moffatt's *BeDevil* (1993), both films by Indigenous filmmakers featuring mainly Indigenous themes. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to state that the book is concerned with cultural, racial and ethnic difference in Australian cinema, rather than diaspora. The definition of diaspora deployed in the introduction is from Kim Butler: a scattering of people who maintain real or imaginary relations with a homeland and who share self-awareness of belonging to a dispersed people resident in the new homeland for beyond one generation. Yet many of the chapters following discuss films featuring characters who are only resident temporarily in Australia. At times the relationship between these 'visitors' and the diasporic condition is addressed (in Coyle's chapter, for example), but at other times not.

The next two chapters in the Theories section focus on the question of ethics in diasporic filmmaking and representation. Audrey Yue discusses questions of ethics and risk and relates these to the discourse of gambling. Yue invokes a shift from the book's focus on the hybridity of ethnic identity to a focus on the ethics of ethnic identity by subverting extant discourses on gambling as inherently deviant or corrupt (when involving ethnic peoples) or as exclusively white (as represented in Australian films from *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1919) to *Oscar and Lucinda* (Gillian Armstrong, 1997)). Through a reading of Heng Tang's short film *The Last Chip* (2006), Yue discusses how the transformation of a popular Hong Kong genre—the gambling film—which has not been readily taken up in the West allows

us to highlight ethics, rather than hybridity, as a more apposite way of thinking about risk-taking in the cinema of new ethnic filmmakers.

Also exploring the issue of ethics, Sonia Tascón explores Tom Zubrycki's film *Molly and Mobarak* (2003) and the use of the cross-cultural love story to discuss the transgression of cultural boundaries. Tascón takes a definition of ethics as a set of values underwriting a cultural order that encompasses official but also, and more importantly, the *everyday* decisions made about how to relate to one another. According to Tascón, it is this which might renew the work of a failed multiculturalism at the level of the personal.

The final chapter in part one is Anthony Lambert's discussion of 'White Aborigines', films about 'non-Australian white women' (mostly British and American) who attempt to become Australian through the process of becoming 'Aboriginal' (in Tom Cowan's *Journey Among Women* (1977) and George Miller's *Over the Hill* (1992) specifically). The chapter could have been a wonderful opportunity to extrapolate on the relationship between whiteness, Indigenous Australians and diasporic hybridity. Instead, Lambert chose to focus on the relations 'between white feminism, neo-colonialism, mimicry and mobility' (63) without directly addressing how diaspora connects to the above.

Part two, Representations, opens with Felicity Collins's chapter on 'wogboy comedies' as a new diasporic comic type that is popular with audiences because they provide a continuity with enduring national types such as the larrikin and the ocker. The chapter that follows, by Greg Dolgoplov, provides an insightful assessment of how the portrayal of Russians in Australian cinema as 'excessive', dangerous and unassimilable operates as a strategy of textual alienation and produces an 'other' against which to define a communal Australian identity. Antje Gnida and Catherine Simpson continue this discussion of nationalising discourses by considering how representations of the 'cruel Hun' and the 'noble Turk' participated in the celebration and glorification of Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) soldiers by constructing a common enemy. Next, Rebecca Coyle explores representations of Japanese in recent Australian cinema, in particular in *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003) and *Bondi Tsunami* (Rachel Lucas, 2004), both very different films in terms of funding models and styles. Again, these films are about Japanese visitors to Australia, not so much immigrants or diasporic communities,

but Coyle makes the important point that in its history of white settlement, Australia has accepted the Japanese mainly on the basis of short-term residence, including tourism, and that this necessarily impacts on how we characterise and understand the Japanese diaspora in Australia. Finally, John Conomos traces the aesthetic, cultural and historical contributions of Greek-Australian filmmakers to Australian cinema with a focus on Ana Kokkinos's *Head On* (1997).

In part three, *Film-Makers*, Marek Haltof characterises Paul Cox as a 'diasporic figure', a filmmaker who is able to make intensely personal films despite the various challenges he has faced. What would have been useful is more discussion about how Cox's films relate more broadly to the Dutch diaspora in Australia. Indeed, the entire third part would have benefited from a closer engagement with the central theme of diasporic hybridity beyond the ethnicity of the filmmaker him or herself. This is especially true of Renata Murawska's chapter on Sophia Turkiewicz's *Silver City* (1984) and the history of Polish migration to Australia, particularly given that Turkiewicz has only made one feature length film in her career. Susie Khamis on the films of Tom Zubrycki addresses this relationship the most clearly. Her chapter begins with a quote from Zubrycki on the difficulties of characterising the Lebanese community as a diaspora given that much depends on the prevailing political climate. Khamis explores how Zubrycki's films and his characters exceed definitions of diaspora and highlight the problematic nature of the concept since his films are as much personal narratives as they are 'diasporic' objects. The final chapter by Ben Goldsmith and Brian Yecies renews a questioning of the concept of diaspora by examining the production context surrounding Sejong Park's short film *Birthday Boy*. Alternately characterising the film as an Australian film, a product of the Korean-Australian diaspora, and an object that connects to a transnational or regional market of Korean and Asian films more broadly, the authors highlight the inability of the term diaspora to adequately cover all of these things. At the end of the book is a very useful annotated 'Diasporic Filmography' by Gary Gillard and Anthony Lambert.

Traversing admirably wide ground, *Diasporas of Australian Cinema* is certainly an interesting read, a provoking volume, and a valuable resource, not only for scholars of Australian cinema but also those engaged with the burgeoning fields of transnational, intercultural, and accented cinema internationally. It is wonderful

to see Australian scholars joining the ranks of these global debates in film while remaining acutely attuned to local contexts and experiences.

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Olivia Khoo is a lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of *The Chinese Exotic* and co-editor (with Sean Metzger) of *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*.

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¹ Hamid Naficy, *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2001; Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1999.