The Representation of the Colonial Past in French and Australian Cinema, from 1970 to 2000

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Abstract

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France and Australia possess such distinctive national traits that they are not habitually compared in relation to their history, identity and culture. However, their national cinemas reveal that they have much in common. A significant number of recent films from both nations bear the mark of a similar obsessional quest for national identity that is linked to the exploration of a troubled colonial past. This shared preoccupation constitutes the starting point for this thesis, which compares the representation of colonial history in the cinema of France and Australia since 1970. It is of course evident that the two nations have had widely differing experiences of colonisation. Modern France is among the ranks of the major empire builders, and Australia is the product of one of Great Britain's most successful colonies. If neither nation can forget its colonial past, it is also for different reasons: France is the principal destination of migrants from her former colonies, and Australia faces landrights claims from her indigenous populations. If these differences provide the distinct social, political and geographical contexts of French and Australian cinema, they do not, however, impinge upon the stylistic and ideological analysis of their colonial thematics.

For the purposes of this thesis, three fundamental criteria determine the inclusion of a film in the corpus: it must have an historical colonial setting; its narrative must focus principally on aspects of the colonisation process; and its director must be a descendant of the former colonisers. Around a dozen films released since 1970 in each country have been identified as matching these criteria and, for the purposes of the thesis, have been called postcolonial films. The content and structures of the films dictate the analytical approach and theories are drawn upon as tools when needed. These theories are widely varied across the disciplines and the theorists include Pierre Sorlin, Edward Said and Albert Memmi. The approach to representing colonial issues varies widely, with the majority of the films in the corpus neither appearing to confront openly nor to support openly the ideology of colonialism. Two exceptions are Coup de torchon (Tavernier, France, 1981) and The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (Schepisi, Australia, 1978). More typical of the ambivalent treatment of colonialism are the popularly attended films such as Indochine (Wargnier, France, 1991) and Picnic at Hanging Rock (Weir, Australia, 1975).

In the first chapter an analysis of the relationship of the films to documented history demonstrates that French films are frequently set during the period between 1910 and 1950, and Australian films during the last half of the nineteenth century. The following chapter examines the relationship of the colonisers to their colonised lands.
and asks if the exceptional attention paid in all the films to the colonial geography has
the effect of assimilating an alien landscape into the Western settlers’ culture and
mythology. The following two chapters address the core element of colonial life - in
Franz Fanon’s terms - its division into two worlds. The first of these chapters examines
the interaction between the coloniser and the colonised through individual relationships
between the two, and addresses the problem that all of these relationships end in
permanent separation. The following chapter explores the interaction between coloniser
and colonised as social groups that are divided by notions of race and discusses the
general epistemological problem of the representation of the Other. The fifth chapter
analyses the symbolic mechanisms being used to structure the films and manipulate the
unconscious effect on the viewer. For example, there are a number of films with
journeys of some kind, orphan-like characters and characters with strong noble savage
qualities. Finally, the sixth chapter compares two of the films to the books from which
they are derived. The object of this double comparison is to isolate differences in the
films which are better explained by changing colonial politics than by inherent
differences between cinema and literature.

In the conclusion, it is argued that there appear to be few sustained attempts at
confronting and resolving the problematic aspects of colonialism’s legacy. This is
especially evident from the predominance of fictitious stories over the depiction of
actual documented events. This tendency in both the French and Australian cinemas to
contain the representation of the colonial past within a fictional framework has the
inevitable consequence of masking history and thus avoiding the necessity of dealing
with it. A further notable tendency was the preference for selecting certain periods and
avoiding others, hence stripping the colonial past of its most embarrassing aspects. For
example, no film could be found which showed the initial phase of the establishment of
a colony. Despite the rarity of films released in France and Australia that openly
challenge colonialism as a whole, many signs are evident throughout these films that the
practices and values defending or justifying colonisation are nevertheless being
questioned.
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Introduction: resolving a past in disrepute

Much of the world’s political and economic infrastructure at the turn of the twenty-first century is the legacy of Western European colonisation over a period spanning more than three centuries. However, since the dismantling of the last remaining colonial empires in the 1960s, the ideals that inspired European colonisation have been thrown into disrepute.¹ This counter-colonial sentiment appears to be particularly notable in the two largest former colonial powers, Great Britain and France, and in the countries that came under their tutelage, where coming to terms with this disreputable history has been a preoccupation in political debate and literature. Marc Ferro comments on this change in the preface to his global study of colonisation:

Today the tune has changed. A guilty conscience has taken over. Anti-colonialism, once confined to the extreme left in France and to old-fashioned liberals across the Channel, has become universal. There are very few false notes. History is called upon to judge, in turn, the terrible misdeeds of the slave trade, the tragic toll of forced labour and God knows what else besides! Drawing up a final balance sheet for the French, Dutch or British presence, one cannot find a single orange that was not defiled, a single apple that was not rotten.²

In this study, we will be attempting to compare how the cinemas of two nations deeply embroiled in the colonial enterprise cope with this realisation. Through the images they present of colonial issues, do these national cinemas appear to regret or defend the colonial past?

Before entering further into the discussion, however, it is important to define the frontier line between what is “colonial” and what is “postcolonial”. The use of this latter term has become problematic, like the term “postmodern”, with widely varying uses.³ The problem is complicated by the fact that, as well as being a term for a chronological period, “postcolonial” refers to the sentiment Marc Ferro describes above, and which corresponds to this same period. Our usage of the term “postcolonial” borrows from Charles O’Brien’s use of it in his chapter in Visions of the East, to
describe the post-1960s cinema focussing on the colonial past. He calls the 1960s the “first postcolonial decade”, and cites films such as The Battle of Algiers (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) and Black Girl (Ousmane Sembène, 1966).4 O’Brien demonstrates how this trend towards a new perspective on colonial history continues in the ten years predating his article:

“(…) numerous films released during the past decade depart from the cinéma colonial in ways significant enough to suggest the emergence of new genres. Especially notable are films with narratives set during the period just prior to decolonisation and featuring female protagonists. Examples include Indochine (Régis Wargnier, 1992), Chocolat (Claire Denis, 1988), Outremer (Brigitte Rouan, 1990) and Bal du gouverneur (Marie-France Pisier, 1990), and L’Amant (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1991).5

Correspondingly, in this study we will follow O’Brien’s use of the term “postcolonial”, and especially apply it to the films made from this period on, with themes focussing on the colonial past. Thus, within the limits of this study, a “postcolonial” film is one which has been made since the 1960s decade with a setting in the colonial past.

Unlike the cinema of the peak colonial era that followed World War One, the colonial theme during the postcolonial period has proved quite marginal, and full-length published works targeting the intersection of Western Europe’s colonial past and cinema remain rare. In our own field, we can cite Abdelkader Benali’s Le Cinéma colonial au Maghreb which appeared in France.6 Dina Sherzer’s anthology, Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, is more the norm: individual authors contribute chapters in anthologies or publish them independently.7 In Australia, studies of postcolonial cinema tend to concentrate more specifically on the representation of Aborigines. There is Karen Jenning’s short study, Sites of Difference: Cinematic Representations of Aboriginality and Gender and the catalogue-style In Black and White and Colour: Aborigines in Australian Feature Films, a Survey, by Peter Malone.8 In addition, Marcia Langton has published a half-length commentary on Aborigines in film and television.9 Apart from these three Australian monographs, the rest of the literature has appeared as chapters of books or as independent articles. The area of “postcolonial
films”, the label we use to describe films representing the colonial past, is thus little explored in the two countries on which we concentrate our attention.¹⁰

Our objective is to help fill this gap, given that cinema remains the most popular art and entertainment form of the postcolonial period and hence has the potential to reflect widely-held views. We propose to seek out these views, by analysing a carefully chosen corpus of films with historical colonial themes. The two countries we examine, France and Australia, are the heirs to significant but differing colonial pasts, a fact which sustains the interest of our comparison. France remains the largest “empire” in the postcolonial world, in the sense that it continues to govern directly to some degree ten overseas colonies. These are the “Départements d'outre-mer”, the “DOM”, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique, and the “Territoires d'outre-mer”, the “TOM”, which include New Caledonia and Tahiti.¹¹ Australia is the direct product of the former British Empire. Consequently, the comparison will be between the attitudes of a people living in a former colonising nation - France - with those of a people living in a nation established initially as a colony - Australia.

This topic integrates a number of different elements from the disciplines of French, History and Cinema Studies and it is important that we establish each one on a solid base. We address firstly the historical context – the “colonial past” of our title – in order to situate these two nations more firmly in the context of the colonial debate. Next, we justify the comparative basis for our study by analysing the concept of “national cinema”, with the aim of arriving at a definition, within the framework of this thesis, of a French film and an Australian film. Then we discuss the reasons behind the organisation of the films into the time period 1970 to 2000, and establish by which criteria we include each film. We turn finally to the methodological approach and the argument, where we explain the logical progression of the chapters.
Historical Context: A Summary of the Colonial Past

The modern colonial period was officially closed on the 14th of December 1960, when the member states of the United Nations voted on a resolution intended to end colonisation in all its forms. The last countries remaining under the authority of a Western power and desiring independence gained it in the two years following. The influence of European colonialism in the world is revealed in the statistics on United Nations member states in 1965: of the 116 member nations, 85 had been under European colonial rule, and 56 of these in the preceding 25 years.

By 1930, the two major colonising powers were France and Great Britain. Up until the declaration of World War II, these two countries had exercised direct control over territories dispersed worldwide over a period of four centuries. Before the end of the nineteenth century, England, echoing the dream of Charles Quint, was able to boast of an empire so vast that the sun never set on it. In 1914 the total area of the French colonial empire was 10,416,000 square kilometres, with a population of 47,986,000 including 1,300,000 European settlers. After the Great War, the French empire increased again, gaining territories from defeated Germany and Turkey. At its peak, the Empire's total territory covered 12 million square kilometres, and was directly governing more than 65 million non-French people.

The general objectives of the British and French colonisations were broadly similar, in that they were both aiming at expanding the influence of their version of Western culture. Their specific objectives, however, were quite different. Sir Walter Crocker, in On Governing Colonies, compares French, British and Belgian approaches. He finds that the clearest distinction can be made between the French and the British
objectives in governing their colonies, the Belgian approach being a blend of the two.

The French, according to Crocker:

(…) aim to make the African a black Frenchman, and to make the colonies not self-governing dominions, but so many Departments [sic] of France. They will be La France d’Outremer. The French Empire is to be welded into a tightly-bound entity, the Union Française, run from the centre, Paris.16

These objectives he contrasts against those of Great Britain:

(…) our aim and also our practice is to eliminate ourselves. We shall not disappear tomorrow nor the day after tomorrow, but the Governor of each British colony is in fact presiding over the liquidation of that colony – as a colony. It is to become a self-governing dominion.17

Sir Walter is writing from a British perspective, revealed by the “our”, but he finds advantages and disadvantages to both systems. But even at the time of his writing – just after the end of World War Two – it was already obvious that the British system had produced several successful nations more or less in its own image: Canada, United States, Australia and New Zealand. These are countries in which the official language is English and their populations are overwhelmingly of immigrant origins, at that time, almost exclusively of British origin. The French colonial system, on the other hand, never produced comparable settler nations in its own image, but as we mentioned earlier, it retains to this day Paris-based control over its overseas départements and territoires.

Though Sir Walter Crocker saw changes coming as a result of the Second World War, it was apparently not obvious yet that the War had put an end to the modern colonial period. But the two great empires were already beginning to experience difficulty controlling the insurrections of the indigenous populations of their dominions at a time when they were having to defend their own metropolitan territories. Germany occupied France practically overnight, and Great Britain needed to concentrate all of her military might in order to avoid the same fate. As Aimé Césaire observes, the Nazi régime taught the dominated peoples that the White Man could also be humiliated.18

One of the “minor” European powers, in his words, applied the same colonialist procedures on the European continent. The force of Germany's attacks was so great that
the United States and the Soviet Union were obliged to intervene, with the result that, after the war, these two countries replaced Great Britain and France as the world’s most powerful countries. France and Great Britain had to dismantle their empires over the following seventeen years. France managed to keep a few vestiges of her colonial endeavours, as we mentioned earlier, the ten overseas departments and territories. Britain also maintains an indirect colonial presence in the guise of the British Commonwealth, the union of former colonies which are now largely independent. Australia has been a member of the British Commonwealth since her federation as a nation in 1901.

It was during the four centuries of the colonial era that the political and economic structures that shape the present world were put into place: e.g. the banking system, the Nation State and the modern administration system. What was officially ended in 1960 was simply the expansionist process that had given birth to the contemporary world. In consequence, the West finds itself in a contradictory situation. To use a biblical metaphor, the West enjoys the fruit of its labour, but is in the embarrassing predicament of having to denounce the methods employed during its “labour”. The second contradiction is that the countries born from decolonisation have all been created in the image of their former oppressors, but without the necessary capital or the infrastructure. Raoul Girardet sums up the dilemma:

In the recently born new independent Nation-states how can we not notice that the existing margin of liberalism in general does nothing else but coincide with what remains from a colonial legacy?

Similarly, how can we not notice that freed from the ties of political dependence, the peoples formerly under tutelage have remained for the larger part faithful to two of the principal models imposed on them by the ex-ruler: the model for technological development and the model for state and administrative organisation. These tools and their mode of use still come from the highly industrialised countries, that is to say, in practice from the former colonising countries. From these also come the widely accepted concepts of Nation-state and collective evolution. Thus the severing of colonial ties has not slowed down the triumphant expansion of most of the forms of Western civilisation, nor its modes of thought, nor its customs, nor its attitudes and behaviour.

The forms of Western civilisation that Girardet describes are defended by principles that derived from what became known as Enlightenment philosophy, which provides the
foundation of many of our most cherished contemporary values, such as individual self-reliance, belief in progress, rejection of traditionalism, and liberty and equality. Enlightenment philosophy has its origins in Descartes's 1637 essay, *Discourse on Method*, where he challenges the epistemological status of science, and is crystallised most obviously in Diderot's and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, published in 1751. Kant defines Enlightenment in his 1784 essay, “What is Enlightenment?” as “man's release from his self-incurred tutelage” and borrowed Horace's axiom *Sapere aude!* – “dare to know!” to encapsulate its spirit. We can easily see the attraction of such a positive and progressive belief system, particularly for the partisans of colonisation. The European empire builders could now justify the conquests of lands held by traditional societies as a civilising mission, the *mission civilisatrice* which would enlighten the world. T. Carlos Jacques compares the way in which Enlightenment philosophy was used to modify the conceptualisation of colonised peoples, past and future, from “savage” to “primitive”:

With Europe's historical superiority came an ethical obligation from which past contacts with Africa had been free, for the cognitive space occupied by the African *qua* primitive was also of moral consequence. The civilised, adult nations of Europe came to see themselves as in some sense duty bound to care for the infant savages of Africa. Abolitionism thus gained a new theoretical foundation. And colonialism was proposed as an answer to Africa's retardation.

By conceiving of the African or any colonised peoples as “primitive” rather than simply “savage”, Europe was able to defend morally its expansion across the world.

There remained a problem, however, and this was the way to explain the clear distinction that was made on a racial basis between the coloniser and the colonised. The essence of Enlightenment philosophy was the recognition of the rights of Man. European colonialism contradicted this because it generally refused citizenship and its concomitant rights to the indigenous peoples of its colonies. Jean-Paul Sartre shows in his essay on colonialism how the underlying racism in the entire colonial system functioned in order to “compensate for the latent universalism of bourgeois liberalism - if all men have the same rights, the colonised man must be made a sub-man.” But this
“compensating” for the universal implications of what Sartre calls “bourgeois liberalism” was of course, hypocritical. What was recognised finally by the United Nations in 1960, particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust, was that the international community could no longer tolerate officially the hypocrisy of the dominant Western philosophical system which proclaimed in theory that all people were equal, but in practice found ways to divide and categorise them.

The concern of the postcolonial world is thus being sure to have cleansed itself of the hypocrisies of the colonial era. Western society continues to value Enlightenment philosophy's ideals, such as freedom of speech and religion, while simultaneously rejecting the misuse of these ideals. Perhaps the reason that dictates why formerly colonised countries often retain the State systems established when they were a colony, such as representative parliaments, is also because this enables them to distinguish between the ideals and their misuse. Nevertheless, these countries remain the poorest in the world and the former colonisers continue to become richer. Within the former colonising nations this situation is also apparent. The migrants from old colonies are the most economically disfavoured. In firmly established ex-colonial dominions - Australia, United States, South Africa and Canada from the British Empire; Argentina, Mexico and Chile from the Spanish; or Brazil from the Portuguese - the indigenous peoples remain at the bottom of the various modes of measuring quality of life. What has happened is that even though we have removed the structures that explicitly created these divisions - direct rule and racial segregation - the same divisions are somehow being perpetuated.

Currently, the French and Australian populations share the common characteristic of being composed of a mix of ethnic groups. These populations are attempting to establish themselves as multicultural communities while allowing the ethnic groups to retain their identities. This multi-ethnicity causes many frictions, and
these frictions are at their most intense between the ex-colonised and the ex-colonisers. Since the 1960s, the largest number of immigrants to France has been coming from the former colonies, and Xavier Pons suggests that “(...) their presence reminds the native-born French of their past’s more delicate moments, such as the Algerian war, and thus reopens too easily old wounds that never really healed.”

In Australia, Aborigines only make up 1 per cent of the population (around 180,000 out of 18 million), but they maintain a significant media presence, which has the effect, as in France, of reminding the non-indigenous population of a past that they also would prefer not to acknowledge. One of the most recent events which provoked bitterness about this topic was the Mabo judgement. In 1992, after ten years of court hearings, the Aborigines finally succeeded in having the legal status of the terra nullius claim revoked, which had the larger consequence of challenging the conditions of the original claim of Great Britain to the Australian continent.

**Defining “National Cinema”**

We now turn from the historical experience providing the subject matter to the means of its expression: the cinema. The use of the term “cinema” in this study is restricted to its major artefact, the feature film. The reason for this is that feature films are more likely to be available to the public over a long period after their initial release – through libraries, video stores and television – and so are generally a more permanent cultural artefact than documentaries and short films. We also follow the convention associated with feature films of treating the director as the authors of the film, in the same way that do Dina Sherzer in *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism*, Tom O’Regan in *Australian National Cinema* and Abdelkader Benali in *Le Cinéma colonial au Maghreb.*
We will also need to define the concept of a national cinema as it applies in this thesis – crucial to our comparison – since this concept is dependent on a wide range of criteria which are sometimes ambiguous. As with film authorship, there is also an ongoing debate that aims to find a satisfactory means of defining the idea of a national cinema. It is obvious from the use of the political term “national” that the term “national cinema” is linked to politics. Susan Hayward in *French National Cinema* adopts Benedict Anderson’s definition of “nation” as an “imagined political community”.27 Being imagined rather than objectively real, such as an island, a nation needs to find a way to create a consistent image of itself in the minds of the millions of individuals who form it. Political discourse attempts this but early in cinema’s development, politicians recognised its power to influence how a nation sees itself and how other nations see it. As early as the 1920s in France, according to Hayward, “calls were being made for a truly national cinema as a defence against the American hegemony”.28

It is obvious how important the films in our study are in the formation of France’s and Australia’s national identity. The films portray an important aspect of these two nations’ past – their colonial endeavours – and as a result, contribute to their national identities. But defining what exactly is “French cinema” as opposed to “Australian cinema” is potentially fraught with problems. Michèle Lagny analyses the dangers associated with defining a national cinema in *De l’histoire du cinéma*:

The idea of a national culture existing is all the more imperative in that some institutions (school, commemorations, etc.) develop and sustain it. Certainly, the notion deserves to be examined and defined. On the one hand it presumes an internal coherence, developed in those States which were centralised early on, and ignoring regional differences. This homogeneity, however, hardly makes sense in pluri-ethnic or pluri-religious countries, or in States having experienced a long colonial occupation. On the other hand, it suggests a fundamental difference from (if not an opposition to) neighbouring national cultures.29

France’s most influential contemporary filmmaker, Jean-Luc Godard, stated at a British Film Institute conference in 1991:

I think there is no French cinema, but there have been French filmmakers and the French are so good at talking about themselves that everybody thought there was a French cinema.30
This quote is an excellent example of the difficulty of classification, since Godard is considered one of the major living French filmmakers, yet he is Swiss-born and lives in Switzerland.

Graeme Turner clarifies the ideological mechanism behind the concept of “national cinema”. He first of all reminds his readers that the idea of a nation state is a relatively modern one, and that identification with the nation is essential for political power. Any social group in order to survive needs a shared sense of identity, and the term nation is used to describe a relatively modern way of organising large social groups. The interest of government is to form a shared sense of identity around the idea of the nation. The cultural industries, such as art, literature and cinema, have an enormous input into the way in which people identify themselves within a nation, and it is therefore in the interests of governments to ensure that these industries can function:

This is one of the reasons why there is so much concern within so many countries over the domination of film and television production and distribution by the United States of America. If we understand our world (or our nation) through its representations, foreign control of the major media or representation does threaten the coherence of the individual’s understanding of that world (or nation).

Many countries outside of the U.S.A. have set up regulatory bodies both to control the incredible input from America, and to fund and develop their own national film industry. A double problem then arises during the funding process: how do nations first represent themselves to themselves, and subsequently, to other nations:

When films act as representatives of as well as representations of the nation overseas they become subject to a different regime of inspection. They are assessed, for instance, for their appropriateness as tourist advertisements, or for their ‘typicality’ as depictions of national life.

The final stage of this process is when the organisations in charge of funding films appear to be prioritising films more for their potential contribution to the ideology of the day as to what constitutes national identity, over the individual films’ inherent aesthetic qualities. For example, in the period following the release of Picnic at Hanging Rock, critics noticed a change in the sort of films being funded by government sources. This period also corresponds to the period during which most of the Australian films in our
corpus were made, and therefore most of the films made which focus on the colonial past:

Although the government film-financing bodies were never organised enough to be in any way conspiratorial, there was a remarkable unanimity about the kinds of films which State and Federal film commissions supported over the next five years. Instead of more ocker comedies, we had what Dermody and Jacka (1987) have called the ‘AFC genre’, a national film style determined by the preferences of the funding bodies and greeted critically as a source of national pride.34

The idea of a genre being defined by a film’s funding sources rather than its style and content is not so unlikely when it is that very style and content that determines whether it will be funded in the first place. It is interesting to note that, except for Walkabout, all of the Australian films in our corpus were funded to some degree by the Australian Film Commission.35 In other words, all the films in our corpus met the criteria sought by the government of the day as films which would both be representative of Australia to international viewers, and representational to the domestic audience of what it meant to be Australian.

The French films in our corpus are less homogeneous in their source of funding. The equivalent body in France to the Australian Film Commission is the Centre National de la Cinématographie. Just three of the French films in our corpus were funded by the C.N.C. These are Chocolat (Claire Denis, 1988), Le Bal du gouverneur (Marie-France Pisier, 1990) and Indochine (Régis Wargnier, 1992). As well as the C.N.C., the government-owned regional television network, France 3, funded La Victoire en chantant (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1976). Les Caprices d’un fleuve was funded from two additional government sources, the government-owned national television network, France 2, and the Fonds Eurimages of the Council of Europe. The remainder of the French films in our corpus were funded, as far as can be ascertained, from private sector sources.

The fact that all the Australian films and almost half the French films have government support by way of their financing is an important factor in placing the
present study into context. It will be useful to bear in mind that these are the films that satisfied the criteria, however vague and implicit, of how Australian and French governments officially wanted the historical colonial themes appearing in these films to be treated. These particular films can act as a benchmark of the official sentiment in respect to the portrayal of the colonial past.

The success of the comparative focus of this study depends on satisfactory definitions of the terms “French cinema” and “Australian cinema”. Our aim, as with film authorship, is not to participate in the debate, but define what we mean when we compare French films on the colonial past with Australian ones. Our method of defining the two cinemas is therefore not intended to apply outside of this work, but at the same time, not be so divergent from others to be meaningless. To this end, our method will be simple: established and widely accepted reference works on cinema will be relied upon for their classifications, as well as cinema journals such as *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif* in France, and *Cinema Papers* and *Encore* in Australia. For example, if a film is listed as French in Jacques Siclier’s *Le Cinéma français*, it will be accepted as French in this study. In general, within the framework of this study, a film is defined as being French if its language (dialogues and credits) is French, produced by a company based in France, and aimed primarily at the French public. These criteria apply equally to an Australian film: it would be in Australian English, directed by an Australian resident, using mainly Australian funding., etc.

But an overly strict application of all these factors would not be workable. We see an example of this in *Walkabout*, which is listed in *Australian Film 1900-1970*.\(^{36}\) It is an adaptation of an Australian novel and the production company, Raab-Litvinoff was based in Sydney\(^ {37} \) But the director Nicholas Roeg is English, the screenwriter Edward Bond, is a well known English playwright, and the producers obtained the funding from Paramount Studios in Hollywood. But the meeting between two young English
immigrant children and an Aboriginal boy - in other words, its subject matter - is unambiguously allegorical of the original meeting between the English and the indigenous occupants of Australia. Following this reasoning, *Walkabout* is also accepted in this study as Australian.38

**Organisation of the Film Corpus**

French and Australian film share a common status as cultural artifacts. Firstly, they both are produced in the very difficult commercial environment in which American films account for at least 70% of ticket sales in each country.39 Secondly, and in response to American cinematic imperialism, both cinemas strongly contribute to their collective national identity and have done so since their inception. Colin Nettelbeck and Jane Warren comment in their introduction to the papers published following the conference on French and Australian cinema in Melbourne in 1995:

>Cinema in both France and Australia has considerable status as an art form, rather than being seen simply as commercial entertainment. Without oversimplifying the complex tensions between art and finance, it seems to be a reasonable assertion that France and Australia share an interest in the primacy of the creative process in cinema, in film as a way of probing and challenging the givens of cultural identity and artistic practice, and also as a way of affirming cultural difference and specificity.40

In France and in Australia, the cinema is a cultural intermediary, and as such, is the ideal vehicle for any study seeking to analyse each respective population’s collective consciousness.

In confining the study to the years between 1970 and 2000, the study is placed clearly at the end of the period that Charles O’Brien, as we mentioned above, calls “the first postcolonial decade”. The year 1970 follows the granting of independence to the last remaining French colonies who wanted it in 196241, and the granting of citizenship to the Australian Aborigines in 1967, after which Australia was genuinely no longer a colony in its strict definition.42 It is additionally the year in which the Australian “New Wave” began, which is quite different from its French homonym. In Australia, the term
signifies the very rebirth of the cinema industry. In the 1960s decade, while France was producing around 1500 films, Australia produced barely a dozen. In 1970, the Liberal Gorton government established the first teaching institution for the cinema and audiovisual industries and an organisation for providing film funding.

It is also in 1970 that one Australian film was released which reflected a significant turning point in the British and Australian attitudes toward their colonial past. Walkabout is the first Australian fiction feature which portrays an Aborigine as a member of a different culture rather than of an inferior culture. This film is not an historical film, but it is included within the corpus of this study to provide an indispensable allegory of the original meeting of Aboriginal and British cultures.

The main film corpus totals twenty-five feature films, selected from each national cinema according to three criteria:

1), that the story takes place in the colonial past. The film is set in a colony of France, or in Australia prior to the year 1967, for the reasons discussed above;

2), that the principal theme of the story itself is colonialism. It is not sufficient in order for a film to be classified as representing the “colonial past” that it has a colonial setting. This setting can easily be used as a backdrop for a romance or a war or a biography, and in these instances, the main theme of the film is not colonisation or colonialism. The two criteria used in constructing the main corpus in the present study are films which, firstly, depict the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, in keeping with our definition of a colony as existing when there is an official legal distinction between the two peoples; and secondly, look at the relationship between the colonisers and their colonised land. These are the two main issues that result when one group of people move onto another people’s territory. As a result, we exclude Pierre Schoendoerffer’s films such as Le Crabe-Tambour (1977) and Dien Bien Phu
(1991). The former concentrates on the legendary memory of a soldier and the latter on the experience of a war by French soldiers – albeit provoked by the French occupation of Indochina. In Australia, My Brilliant Career (Gillian Armstrong, 1991), focuses on the early career of a female writer. Peter Weir’s Gallipoli is interested in how people behave in a war setting and Bruce Beresford’s Breaker Morant (1980) examines the problems of hierarchy and authority within the British and Australian system.

3), its director must be a descendant of the former colonisers. The reference works we rely on such as the Larousse Dictionnaire des films and Australian Film 1978-1994, among others, employ the convention of treating the director as the author – the person ultimately responsible for the creative decisions in the making of the film. We follow this convention which implies further that the director directs the team of actors and technicians to achieve her or his creative vision using their input. We go one step further and assert that within the constraints of this study, a director who is a descendant of the former colonisers – that is native French or Australian of British origin – is more likely to share the views of her or his destination audiences who are of more or less similar origins. This view is not, however, intended to contribute to any general debate over film authorship, which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

The number of films produced in each country matching these criteria is roughly equal, which facilitates comparison. There are eleven French films and fourteen Australian films, including Walkabout45.

One thing to remember, however, is that the total number of French films released between 1970 and 2000 is almost seven times higher than the number during this period for Australian films.46 Proportionally, around nine times more Australian
films focus on the colonial past than French ones. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that Australia is a former colony, unlike France. Hence, Australians are permanently conscious of their colonial origins, whereas French-born citizens whose families remained in France may not have been so directly affected by colonisation.  

Most of the films in the primary corpus have not attracted large audiences. The two most commercially successful French films with a colonial setting are both set in Vietnam. *Indochine* (Régis Wargnier, 1991) focuses on the last days of the French presence in the colony of the film’s title. Some film analysts argue that it distorts reality in order firstly, to portray colonial Indochina as a lost paradise, and secondly, to convince its audience that France seduced Vietnam, rather than conquered it. *The Lover/L’Amant* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1991) could also be accused of contributing to this notion of French colonialism being seductive. The film is about an intense and illicit love affair between a young French girl (15 years old) and a Chinese man (32 years old). The fact that the Chinese is not Indochinese matters little in the film, which we will analyse at length in the last chapter: what matters is the exoticisation of the former colony. But neither of these two films, nor any of the other French films in the corpus, are listed among the 218 top grossing films shown in France between 1945 and 2000. This means that none of them has exceeded the 4.58 million tickets sold achieved by the last film on the list, *Vera Cruz* (1955, U. S.).

Two of the Australian films are listed in the 100 highest grossing Australian films (as opposed to all films released in Australia). Both share the common characteristic of ignoring any reference to the forced occupation of Aboriginal Australia. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) has earned a high profile in the history of Australian cinema as an aesthetically accomplished film. From the date of its release until 11 July 2000, it had gross ticket sales of $5.1 million. It includes a cameo Aboriginal role: a tracker whose presence is momentary. However, this film deserves
study for its treatment of the effect of the Australian countryside on Europeans who try to impose European environmental values on it. The Man from Snowy River (George Miller, 1982) was the most attended film in Australian history, even attracting more spectators than Hollywood blockbusters such as Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975), and Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977). Its ticket sales from its release in 1982 until 2000 are $17.2 million. Its story explores a myth in which Anglo-Celtic pioneers conquer apparently virgin mountain country. The complete absence of Aboriginal characters appeals perhaps to Australians’ need to distance themselves from the manner in which their adopted country was acquired. This film is therefore just as revealing for the impact of its narrative on the public as for its purely diegetic elements. Further to its commercial success, it generated a sequel and a television series which continued to be aired as late as 2000. We can assume that the other Australian films the corpus all achieved box office takings less than the one-hundredth film on that list, Running on Empty, which made $1.2 million. The film at the top of the list was Crocodile Dundee, with total box office takings to the 11 July 2000 of $47 million in Australia.53

While this work is focussed on the films and not on their audience response, the public's reaction to certain films does merit brief comment. In the case of the above four, which had exceptional success in comparison to the other films in the corpus, it could be argued that in engaging interest with the maximum number of people, they therefore reveal best the audiences’ own feelings about colonialism and colonisation. But it is very hard to interpret accurately the reasons behind a film's success or failure to attract a public. An example of a notable failure at the box office is The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (Fred Schepisi, 1978). It is a film made by a director who has had enduring commercial and critical success, and adapted closely from a book written by an author of high profile, Thomas Keneally. It is unlikely that it failed to attract audiences because it was badly made, as were many of the other films, and we will thus
be examining this film at length. What is true is that The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is the one film which squarely confronts the brutal reality of Britain’s settlement of Australia and the killing of its indigenous people. Did it fail solely because of its colonial theme, because of its being, in the words of Pauline Kael, “a dreamlike requiem mass for a nation's lost honour”?54 Another possible disincentive to seeing this film for many middle-class film viewers could have been the multiple axe murder scene lasting four minutes. This scene may well have kept away more people than, for example, the confrontational scene in the latter part of the film which sets the number of Aborigines killed since white settlement against the number of whites. The point, of course, is that without interviewing every audience member, we cannot even speculate on the film’s poor reception.

A large proportion of the films, because of or in spite of their reception in the cinema, are available at the date of writing in video format, either in private video clubs or in publicly-owned collections. Some of the films have also been shown on television. This means effectively that, once again, one cannot use the box office figures to interpret audience reaction or awareness of a film, because many more people may have seen a given film than these figures would suggest. Two films are completely unavailable. The first, a French one, Biribi, is not listed anywhere, including in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale and of the Archives du CNC, (Daniel Moosman, 1971). The second is Australian, Eliza Fraser (Tim Burstall, 1976), to which access has been difficult since its purchase by an American production company around 1990.

Methodology

Our broad methodological approach is to begin with the obvious and work our way systematically through the chapters to the hidden. Thus, we begin by analysing the
settings in time and in space; then investigate the characters and the social divisions; and finally the symbolic and the specifically cinematic elements.

The basic principles governing the approach of this study are:

1) The themes and motifs of the films themselves underpin the chapter structure. The films are approached as cultural objects and cinema is seen as an agent of history. Individual films have been chosen according to the continuing richness of their content and form. The richer the film, the more often it will reappear under the different points of entry in each chapter;

2) Theories of postcoloniality and other studies of postcolonial films will be called upon according to their explanatory potential. The theories or models will be used as tools; the aim of the thesis is to decode the films not to test theories. As Pierre Sorlin finds:

(...) the technique of defining a model and then trying to find proof of it in films is still not a very satisfactory method. With this procedure, we are sure to find at the end only what was postulated at the outset.55

The best methodological text available for the study of large corpuses of historical films appears to be Pierre Sorlin's: *The Film in History: Restaging the Past*.56 This text offers two fundamental positions regarding the study of films portraying the past. Firstly, that historical tradition is often an instrument for talking about the present.57 This is an important point, which underlines a fundamental presupposition behind this thesis, that in studying films set in the colonial past, contemporary society can be interpreted. Secondly, Sorlin asserts that films dramatising history are not historical works:

The contingent aspect of the historical tradition, with which historians are deeply concerned, is completely ignored by the producers of historical films. It must be said that this type of film is not an historical work: even if it appears to show the truth, it in no way claims to reproduce the past accurately. So I think that when professional historians wonder about the mistakes made in an historical film, they are worrying about a meaningless question.58

What Sorlin means is that the film has to be studied for itself, and not for its relation to what are accepted as historical facts. His reason for this claim is simply that there is no direct access to history, only to texts which document it. It is necessary to be aware of
the existence of actual historical events, but it is also necessary to be aware that firstly, these have been deliberately chosen to the exclusion of other events, and that secondly, these chosen events will have been described according to the concerns of the period in which they are being recorded:

When reading books by historians of the nineteenth century, we immediately understand that history for them was not what it is for us and, consequently, their historiography was different from ours: in looking at political or diplomatic life, they used scales and starting points which do not work for the social or economic life with which we are concerned.59

Another characteristic Sorlin describes which precludes treating historical films as historical documents is the use of fictional episodes to move the focus of the narrative from the general to the specific:

Most historical films (though not all - this does not apply to October) combine actual events and completely fictitious episodes. It is very seldom that a film does not pass from the general to the particular, and arouse interest by concentrating on personal cases; this is one of the most direct forms of appeal to identification, an appeal which is in fact not specific to the cinema. Fiction and history react constantly on one another, and it is impossible to study the second if the first is ignored.60

Sorlin uses the term “historiography” rather than “history” when needing to discuss a film's reference points to the past, as a reminder that it is an interpretive method subject to constant change rather than a set of unchanging facts as popularly conceived.

But while Sorlin offers this general approach to understanding films representing history, he does not extend his advice as far as analysing a large corpus of films. In fact, we have discovered no film analyst who does. If we consider the example of Colin Crisp’s The Classic French Cinema, we find that this is distinguished from our study by being based on a very large corpus – around 2000 films – and it consequently is primarily statistical61. The closest study in size to our corpus is Abdelkader Benali’s Le Cinéma colonial au Magreb, which begins with around thirty films but concentrates closely on six.62 It offers no explicit reasoning as to the choice of these six films. There are, as we stated earlier, no examples of full-length Australian studies of large corpuses. In any case, neither Crisp’s nor Benali’s work is a
comparative study across two cinemas – they both remain within a single general category.

This study appears to be in its own category. It is a study on three different levels initially: of individual films; comparisons between these films; and comparisons between the films as French and Australian. Within the films, we need to study the narrative elements as well as the cinematographic elements. To these, we must consider anthropological, cultural, linguistic and historical factors. We need to accept also that we cannot study twenty-four films in depth and so we need to select.

Our situation is much the same as Tom O’Regan’s in *Australian National Cinema*. O’Regan finds in commencing his study that:

A national cinema focus forces an analysis of the connections between these elements and insists, however unevenly, on their collocation. The hybrid analytical strategies demanded in examining national cinemas are also its strength. Significantly, national cinema writing is neither the analysis of a film text nor policy discourse; neither film industry journalism and economic analysis nor film reviewing, but a mixture of each. Because a national cinema study needs to deal with texts, technology, language, power and society, it has a chance of holding onto the multiple connections that make the cinema ‘possible’ and drive it forward.

In this study we will also need to manipulate “hybrid analytical strategies”. Our approach to the comparative nature of this study is to make the comparisons constantly during our course, as opposed to dividing the thesis into two and then doing a later comparison. In this way, we anticipate being able continually to keep our growing impression of the French and Australian representations of the colonial past in a single framework. We consider that by concentrating on a small number of films as mentioned above, we have the advantage of studying them from a hybrid of perspectives and thus gain a solid understanding of them. We do not undertake structural summaries of each and every film, but we do take account of a number of relevant structural elements in the totality of the films in order to make reasoned and justifiable comments on all the corpus.
The Argument

Having outlined the continuing debate on the colonial past, our reasons for choosing cinema as a tool of analysis, our general objectives and our particular approach to studying the films, we can finally address our goal. This is to argue that many of the films released in France and Australia representing the colonial past continue to defend colonisation despite their superficially critical stance towards it. But we are also interested in the existence of films that do challenge colonialism and in seeking to establish whether they signal a change in attitudes to the colonial past. In order to support this argument, we will examine as many of the films as is practical, allowing for the fact that some offer more material for analysis than others.

The comparison between France and Australia will be maintained throughout the course of the chapters. The advantage that the comparison gives us is that we will be able to understand better the elements that are specific to one or the other, and in the case of those held in common, obtain an insight into the overall Western feeling about the colonial past.

Because the overall defining characteristic of all the films is that they are set in the past, Chapter One, “Historiography”, examines the films’ relationship to external history, or historiography. Its aim is to establish both the degree to which French and Australian films set in the colonial past represent documented historical periods, events, and characters, and the degree to which they favour fictional content.

Next, we turn to the analysis of the internal elements of the films, which forms the remainder of the study. The most striking characteristic common to all the films in the corpus is the presence of landscapes that show little or no sign of European habitation. The unanimous incidence of these pre-settlement landscapes is a strong indication that they are an important component of the filmic reconstruction of the
colonial past, both in Australia and France. Chapter Two, “Filmic Treatment of the Colonial Landscape”, examines the different roles that landscape can play.

After looking at these two fundamental elements in the settings of the “postcolonial” films - the temporal setting and the physical setting - we turn to the next most important aspect of colonisation - the relationship between those who colonise and those who are colonised. We do this in two stages. The first, Chapter Three, “Images of Colonial Life: Interracial Liaisons”, investigates the intersection of the colonised and colonising peoples at the individual level through the representation of cross-cultural relationships, and discusses the implications emerging from the fact that all these relationships are shown to end within the confines of the films’ narratives. Following this, Chapter Four, “Images of Colonial Life: Social Conflict”, continues this investigation at the social level, comparing the representation of indigenous communities to that of the European communities, and broaching the general epistemological problem of representing the Other.

Once we have obtained a general understanding of the representative mechanisms at work in both the settings and the characters, we can focus our attention on the way in which the stories are told - the narrative mechanisms. Do certain types of situations and characters recur across the corpus? This is one of the questions taken on in Chapter Five, “Symbolic Structures and Historical Verisimilitude”, which responds to the frequent presence of certain symbolic structures, such as the journey motif, the orphan character, the noble savage and scenes taking place in darkness. How does the marriage of these universal structures with colonial content influence the representation of the colonial past? They are so predominant that we begin this chapter with Baudrillard’s observation that cinema privileges the symbolic over the sociological. This chapter goes on to investigate the consequences of symbolic and dramatic
imperatives taking priority over the representation of history, or in other words, to investigate why verisimilitude seems more important than truth.

Remaining at the narrative level, the final chapter, “The Politics of Adaptation: We of the Never-Never and The Lover/L’Amant”, aims to identify characters and events in the films that appear to have been included to meet contemporary audiences expectations of how colonial history should be represented. The best way of uncovering these politically inspired elements is to compare a film that has been adapted from a book written during the colonial period. By isolating those differences in the film adapted from the novel which cannot be explained in terms of the differences between the two genres, we can best understand the historical, cultural and political concerns of the period in which the films are made. We of the Never-Never is the only film in our corpus that has been adapted from a colonial novel and provides a fertile source of comparison. Our understanding of the relationship between the colonial past and contemporary society is further enriched by comparing The Lover/L’Amant firstly, with the book from which it was adapted, and then with the book that Marguerite Duras wrote in response to the film.

The conclusion consolidates the findings of each chapter and compares the differences between the French and Australian films studied. The core of this study is this comparison, and the differences and similarities between the two countries will provide us with considerable insight into broader contemporary attitudes towards the difficult legacy of colonialism.

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1 We ascribe to the definition for “colonialism” provided in Alan Bullock et al., The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought (London, Fontana, 1988): “Colonialism is a form of imperialism based on maintaining a sharp and fundamental distinction (expressed often in law as well as in fact) between the ruling nation and the subordinate (colonial) populations.” (p. 410)

This usage originated in Bill Ashcroft et al.’s *The Empire Writes Back*, (London & New York, Routledge, 1989), see pages 2-3 for their argumentation on this definition.


The underlining of films is also particular to this thesis in order to distinguish films from books.


Dina Sherzer (ed.). *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism*. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1996.


This term will serve to distinguish these films from the “colonial” films with similar settings, but which were produced during the colonial past. Thus, “postcolonial” films also fall under the broader “historical film” category.


From Hudson, W.J., *Australia and the Colonial Question at the United Nations*, Sydney, University of Sydney Press, 1970, pp. 6-7. The vote was 89 affirmative, 0 against and 9 abstentions. To quote: “These abstaining states comprised: The Dominican Republic, a small Caribbean state of negligible stature; Portugal, perhaps the most obtuse of the colonial powers; Spain, the nature of whose government had in former years been described as a potential menace to international peace by Australia, which had played a part in effecting its censure by the United Nations; South Africa, the only member to fully support Portugal in the United Nations and a state whose internal racist policies and some external policies had for some time appalled most members; France, which recently lost a constitution because of her inability for a time to find an answer to her Algerian colonial problems; Belgium, a state whose reputation had been jeopardized by her answer to her Congo colonial question; a probably reluctant United States; Britain, still bedevilled by a host of unsolved colonial questions; and Australia.”

The former Spanish empire had been largely dissolved by the end of the nineteenth century. Holland in 1930 was the third largest colonial power, Portugal the fourth, Belgium the fifth and Italy the sixth. See Bernard Droz, *Les Décolonisations*. Paris, Seuil, 1996, pp. 4-6.


Ibid. The footnote on page 12 states: “The additional territory came mainly from League of Nations mandates over former German (Togo and Cameroon) and Turkish (Syria and Lebanon) territories.”


Ibid., pp. 66-67.


Comment d’autre part ne pas remarquer que, libérés des liens de la dépendance politique, les peuples anciennement assujettis sont dans l’ensemble restés fédèles à deux des principaux modèles imposés par l’ex-dominateur : le modèle du développement technique et celui de l’organisation étatique et administrative. Les outils et leurs modes d’emploi viennent toujours des pays hautement industrialisés, c’est-à-dire, pratiquement des anciens pays colonisateurs. De ceux-ci viennent également les conceptions généralement admises de l’État-nation et du devenir collectif. Ainsi la rupture des liens coloniaux n’a-t-elle nullement ralenti l’expansion conquérante de la plupart des formes de la civilisation occidentale, de ses modes de pensée, de ses mœurs, des ses attitudes et de ses comportements. ” Tr. John Emerson.


tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack or resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’ - that is the motto of enlightenment.”


“Mabo provides the opportunity for Aboriginal people to assert their Common Law rights, other than the ownership of Reserves, to land in areas such as Vacant Crown Land, National Parks and conservation areas under principles laid out under the 1992 High Court judgment. Aboriginal people, however, maintain that Mabo is far more than a question of land ownership and control; it is an opportunity for them to free themselves from colonial control.”


28 Ibid., p. 5.

29 “L’idée qu’il existe une culture nationale est d’autant plus impérative que certaines institutions (écoles, commémorations, etc.) l’élaborent et la maintiennent. Là encore, cependant, la notion mérite d’être interrogée et circonscrite. D’une part elle présume d’une cohérence interne, développée dans des États précocement centralisés (Angleterre, France), et qui fait fi des différences régionales ; pourtant cette homogénéité n’a guère de sens dans les pays pluri-ethniques ou pluri-religieux, ni dans les États ayant subi une longue occupation coloniale. D’autre part elle suggère une différence fondamentale (quand ce n’est pas une opposition) avec les cultures nationales voisines.” Lagny, Michèle. De l’histoire du cinéma. Paris, Armand Colin, 1992, p. 98.


32 Ibid., p. 137.

33 Ibid., p. 138.

34 Ibid., p. 143.

35 Walkabout is in a category of its own in any case: its scripting and preproduction processes were begun before there was any government funding in Australia, and secondly, it was funded by Paramount Pictures in Hollywood.


38 David Stratton, the SBS film critic, did not classify Walkabout as an Australian film as the financing was American. He does not elaborate any further. See Stratton, David. The Australian Film Revival. Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1980, p.7.

39 To give some statistical examples, out of the top grossing twenty films released in Paris during the twelve month period October 1999 to September 2000, 4 films were French and 16 were American. Of the French films, 2,387,186 tickets were sold out of the total of 16,406,818. This is just 14.5% to France and 85.5% to America. Compare this to the same period exactly four years earlier, when out of the top grossing twenty films, six were French and one was English. Out of the total tickets sold of 13,688,654 the American films attracted 9,737,130 people, or in other words, 71%. America seems to be winning the race for market share in France. In Australia the situation regarding American dominance appears much worse. The figures available for the top grossing films in the three year period ending September 2000 are in dollars grossed instead of ticket numbers. The only Australian film is The Matrix (The Wachowski brothers, 1997); which although filmed at Fox Studios in Sydney, is directed by two Americans, the lead role is played by an American and the finance is American. All the other films are American, headed by Titanic at over 47 million dollars. Similarly, the top 30 video sales for the week ending 18 October 2000 listed 29 American films and 1 Australian film, Me, Myself, I (Philippa Karmel, 1999), which had already peaked at number 23 and was on its way down.


41 After the granting of independence to Algeria, the Comoro Islands (1975) and Djibouti (1977) obtained independence during Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s presidential term.
Before 1967, the Aboriginal population was included in the flora and fauna figures of Australia, a detail which is very telling about their treatment by the British and their descendants until then. As we cited in Footnote 1 from the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, a colony is defined most easily when there is an official distinction made between the ruling colonising population and the subordinated colonised population. In other words, Australia fulfilled the principal prerequisite to being defined as a colony sixty-six years after it believed that it was no longer one.

See the respective years catalogued in Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1980.

To digress briefly, *Walkabout* was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in the following year, 1971.

The total films produced in France released in the 30 years from 1970 to 2000 is approximately 4000.

It has been noted by commentators such as Xavier Pons in his *Multiculturalisme en Australie* (Paris, L’Harmattan, 1992) that the colonies have come to the coloniser. Most migrants to the two great ex-colonial powers of Great Britain and France come from their former colonies.


We use the double title in English and French when discussing this film as it was filmed in English, dubbed into French, and the two versions were released simultaneously.


Australian Film Corporation, website, [www.afc.gov.au/GTP/mrboxoffice.html](http://www.afc.gov.au/GTP/mrboxoffice.html). The subsequent figures are from this source.

Not the same George Miller as the director of Mad Max (1979), and to further confuse identification, both directors are born in 1943.

Australian Film Corporation, web site, op.cit.


Sorlin, Pierre, ibid.

Sorlin, p. 17. Sorlin defines “historical tradition”: “To clarify matters, we will use the word ‘historiography’ to refer to the work of historians (or any other people) based, in principle at least, on all the available documents, and we will call the descriptions proposed by the groups belonging to the same society ‘historical traditions’.”

Sorlin., p. 21.

Sorlin, p. 41.

Sorlin, pp. 21-22.


Abdelkader Benali, op. cit.

Tom O’Regan, op. cit.

Ibid., pp. 3-4.
Chapter 1

Historiography

Because the films in our corpus depict the colonial past, they fit the classification of “historical film”. In this chapter, we are going to address the particular implications that result from a film linking its narrative to colonial history.

In Pierre Sorlin’s The Film in History: Restaging the Past, he asks how we know that we are watching an historical film:

A spectator watching an unfamiliar film can type-cast it in minutes. In the case of the historical film, what are the signs by which it can be recognised as such? There must be details, not necessarily many of them, to set the action in a period which the audience unhesitatingly places in the past - not a vague past but a past considered as historical. The cultural history of every country and every community includes dates, events and characters known to all members of that community. This common basis is what we might call the group’s ‘historical capital’, and it is enough to select a few details from this for the audience to know that it is watching an historical film and to place it, at least approximately. When the period is less well known, or does not belong to the common heritage, then the film must clearly stress the historical nature of the events.1

The question we need to ask to open this study is more specific: not just how do we know that we are watching an historical film, but how do we know that we are watching a film that is set in the colonial past of either France or Australia?

The aim of this chapter is first of all to conduct an overview of the corpus to establish the films’ historiographical relationship with the colonial past. We will be discussing in particular what sort of periods within the colonial past, as we outlined it in the Introduction, have been chosen as settings. Are any periods favoured or avoided? We will also look at the degree to which the films are fictional. Do they choose an actual period, but then relate a totally fictional narrative within this period? Are they biographies of actual people? Do they depict actual historical events?
Secondly, we analyse closely three films with a view to obtaining a more intimate understanding of the narrative and cinematographic mechanisms that they deploy in reconstructing their versions of the colonial past.

**Historical Films?**

The first question that interests us is whether “postcolonial” films, as defined for the purpose of this study, depict actual documented events or lives, or fictional ones. Among the French and Australian films which meet the criteria to be included in our corpus, only one could be argued to represent an entire documented historical event, and that is *Burke and Wills* (Clifford Graeme, 1985). This is different from the situation one finds in the depiction of French colonial wars, a topic that is separate from, but related, to ours. There are two French films based on events that took place during colonial wars. The *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* bases its story on actual events, but changes the names of the persons involved to allow for fictional input. Among the other Australian films, aside from *Burke and Wills*, we find that no historical event is portrayed, but four of the films do portray the lives of real people who lived during the colonial era. The earliest of these is *A Faithful Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings and Escape of Eliza Fraser* (Tim Burstall, 1976). This film is a comedy based on the Eliza Frazer’s diaries written after she survived a shipwreck in 1836. She lived with a convict and some Aborigines on what has been known since as Frazer Island. After being rescued, she went back to England and made a living telling her story. *Mad Dog Morgan* (Philippe Mora, 1976) tells the story of a bushranger (played by Dennis Hopper) in the 1850s who becomes a folk legend. *We of the Never Never* (Igor Auzins, 1982) is based on the 1904 autobiography of Mrs Aeneas Gunn, a woman who lived on a station in the Northern Territory. *Burke and Wills* dramatises the last ill-fated voyage of the two well-known explorers. These are the best-known colonial
Australians who are given a postcolonial screen resurrection, and we classify it biographical since it is based on the writings of Burke and focuses so much on the experiences described in it. The man who claimed Australia for Great Britain, Captain Cook, or the leaders of the first fleet, have not yet been given cinematic treatment. Ned Kelly, the nation's number one folk hero, was the subject of an early Australian prototypical feature, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906), and was again represented in a 1970 British production, *Ned Kelly*, directed by Tony Richardson, with Mick Jagger in the title role.

Six French films are based on the lives of real people who spent all or part of their lives under colonial rule, but the narratives have been fictionalised to varying degrees. *Biribi* (Daniel Moosmann, 1971) is adapted from the semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Georges Darien. The *Lover/L’Amant* is based on the autobiographical novel of French author Marguerite Duras, born in 1914 at Gia Dinh in Indochina. Both these films signal their referential link to real life during the opening credits. Three films are based on the lives of their directors, *Chocolat*, *Outremer* and *Le Bal du gouverneur*. All three of these directors are women who spent their childhood in a French colony. *Chocolat*, although based on part of the childhood of its director, Claire Denis, never signals this fact. Claire Denis distances herself from her filmic alter ego by calling her France Dalens. Brigitte Roüan employs a similar technique in *Outremer* (1990). Although the story is based on her childhood in pre-independence Algeria, and she plays one of the main characters herself, none are called Brigitte. The character she plays is called Malène. Similarly, in *Le Bal du gouverneur* (1990), Marie-France Pisier recounts a story based on her childhood in New Caledonia, but with fictional characters. The most recent French film at the time of writing set in the colonial past, *Les Caprices d'un fleuve* (Bernard Giraudeau, 1996) tells the story of the fictional governor of French Equatorial Africa during the 1780s. Giraudeau's story is
nevertheless based on the writings of four historical figures. In the list of credits published in *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, Mai 1997, No. 462, Bernard Giraudeau is cited as the author of the “scénario et dialogues” - script in English – that have been: “...freely adapted from the *Diary of the Chevalier de Bufflers* and from works by Jean-Louis Leconte, Jean-Louis Bertuccelli and Chantal Villepontoux-Chastel”.

Four French films, while recounting entirely fictional stories, refer to a major war. *La Victoire en chantant* (1976), the earliest of them, is set in Africa in 1915, and is a parody of the conflict between Germany and France, far away in Europe. *Coup de torchon* (1981) opens in 1938, and tells the story of a cowardly, corrupt colonial police officer who kills the people who threaten him one by one, including an innocent black man. *Fort Saganne* (1984) begins in 1911 and continues into the beginning of the Great War. Gérard Depardieu plays the hero of the film, an officer who is eventually killed after a battle against the Germans. *Indochine* (1991) takes place either side of the Indochinese war. An exiled plantation owner played by Catherine Deneuve reminisces in Geneva in July 1954 at the time of the *Accords de Genève* about her last years in Indochina in the 1930s.

The picture that emerges about the relationship of the French films to history is that, in general, the filmmakers have been very cautious. They appear to avoid direct identification with documented events, with just the two exceptions, *La Question* and *Diên Biên Phu*. Neither do they represent the lives of any of the celebrated empire builders of the colonial period. For example, there are no films made since 1970 on the life of the Père de Foucauld’ or of Marshal Lyautey. In fact, the most notable postcolonial film made about the life of one of France's greatest contributors to the “civilising mission” was produced in Gabon, part of former French West Africa. *Le Grand Blanc de Lambaréné* (Bassek ba Kobhio 1995) recounts the last twenty years of Albert Schweitzer, the Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1952, who founded the Lambaréné
Hospital in 1913, and is an open challenge to the European conviction that hospitals were and are necessary to the African peoples' health and survival.9

Unlike the French postcolonial films with wholly fictional narratives, the Australian equivalents rarely refer to any major historical event. The one notable exception is The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, which focusses on Federation. The remaining six Australian films, with the exception of Walkabout, which is not historical, have narratives that are completely fictional. In order of release, Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975) creates the impression that it is based on the real story of a party of schoolgirls who go missing in February 1900, but it is in fact entirely imaginary; Manganinnie (John Honey, 1980) in a not dissimilar manner, offers itself as a hypothetical story of the last Tasmanian Aborigine, but it is not;10 George Miller's The Man from Snowy River (1982), is a filmic expansion of a character in the poem of the same title by A.B. “Banjo” Paterson; Bush Christmas (Henri Safran, 1983) is set in the outback of the 1950s and is about a group of children who succeed in capturing a band of cattle thieves; Morris West's The Naked Country (Tim Burstall, 1985) is about the confrontation in the 1950s outback between a white landowner and an Aboriginal tribe which claims sacred ownership of his land, and; finally, Robbery Under Arms (Donald Crombie and Ken Hannam, 1985) is a story about a bored English aristocrat who becomes the legendary, but wholly imaginary, bushranger, Captain Starlight.11

By drawing on Brian McFarlane’s three basic categories of historical films, and adding a fourth to include films which are directly biographical, we can compile the following chart, which highlights the relationship of film to history and fiction12:
### Key to Terms on the chart

- **Events**: actual documented events
- **Lives actual**: biographies and autobiographies
- **Lives fict’d**: all characters are fictional, although the setting may be a documented one
- **All fiction**: all components of the film are fictional and no actual event or person is referred to.

At this stage we can determine one principal difference (and one principal common point in their relationship to historical phenomena) between French and Australian cinemas. The French lean towards fictional stories based on actual lives, while the Australians prefer a more strictly biographical approach. The French proclivity for fictionalising lives may reflect their reluctance to associate themselves too closely to what is seen as a distasteful past. On the other hand, the need of the white Australians for the biographical portrayal of real persons may be a symptom of a much broader need to build their own mythology at any cost.

Both the French and Australians show a strong preference for making films which are entirely fictional. Can a hypothesis be offered regarding the general characteristic of French and Australian postcolonial films to avoid direct representations of actual historic events or people? Recall that no film focussing on colonisation directly represents a documented event in colonial history.13 No French film directly portrays the life of an actual person as a biography, and four Australian
films do. The films in their majority prefer to distance themselves from history itself, and choose instead to depict imaginary stories. They do not confront specific historic events which shaped the present. This suggests that postcolonial films would be more accurately described as “period films” than “historical films”. Their stories are concerned with conveying general impressions of a period, rather than the specific representations associated with the historical film.

Films which have historical settings invariably influence their spectators' image of history, and thus postcolonial films are contributing to the collective memory. But what is the effect on this memory if the majority of the films represent imaginary events rather than those which actually occurred? By representing imaginary events located nevertheless in a specific period, the narratives move from the specific to the symbolic. A film depicting an imaginary incident instead of an historically documented one is more likely to be interpreted as representational of other similar situations in similar periods. Fictional films in recognisable situations could be understood to symbolise all such comparable situations. We will return to this question at the end of the chapter after having analysed three of the films more closely.

**Periods chosen**

We will now turn our attention to the dates of the films’ settings, with the intention of identifying any particular periods preferred or avoided. To do this, we will arrange the films in a chart which displays them according to their setting dates. The table has been divided into chronological blocks of fifty years starting with the 1650s, the period when the French and British began building their colonial empires.
One can see definite preferences particular to each cinema. The French films cluster around the forty-year period from the mid 1910s to the mid 1950s. This corresponds to the period when the French Empire reached its peak and began losing power. It also corresponds to the period during which France was involved in the two world wars, and most of the films make a reference to these wars. The Australian films, on the other hand, tend to cluster around a much earlier period, from the 1830s to 1900. This corresponds to the period during which Australia was developing its identity as a nation, and preparing for formal nationhood in January 1901. In Australia, since 1970, many films have been released which are set in the historical period since Federation, but they are not included in this study because they concentrate on issues specific to established white culture without reference to colonisation or to the indigenous population.14 We note that the initial period of colonisation, both in France and in Australia, has been avoided. No doubt the filmmakers have not wished to confront the genocidal operations which must have been taking place against the indigenous populations in order to appropriate the land for the Europeans.15 The earliest settings are, for a French film, the 1780s, in Les Caprices d’un fleuve, and for an Australian film, the 1830s, both for Eliza Frazer and Manganinnie.

The impression from the data is that the contemporary French audience is more interested in the recent colonial period during which the nation lost power, and not in the early part of colonisation when France was acquiring this power. The French films
rarely confront the colonial problem directly, however. The most popular films, which have been called “the three Indochinese ones”\textsuperscript{16}, \textit{L’Amant}, \textit{Diên Biên Phu} and \textit{Indochine} - the three films released around 1991 set in colonial Indochina - seem to have been produced with the idea of reassuring contemporary French audiences that their past colonial activities were carried out with the best intentions. The contemporary Australians, on the other hand, appear more interested in the middle colonial period, that is, comfortably after conquest and settlement, and before the middle of the twentieth century when the methods of colonisation began to be seriously challenged.

**Historical References**

This section investigates the ways in which the films signal firstly, that they are set in the past, and secondly, that their principal subject matter is the colonial past. The films which are most potentially interesting for this examination are those which are entirely or partly fictional, as they cannot be identified directly with actual events or lives. The aim is to describe the narrative and filmic techniques used to obtain the verisimilitude for these films' relationship with the actual documented historical period in which they are set. The first film is \textit{Coup de torchon}, because it is a fictional story deliberately set in a key period, 1938-9, when it was becoming more obvious that there would be another European war. Retrospectively, it could be added that the Second World War was the catalyst for the end of European world domination. Following the analysis of \textit{Coup de torchon} is an analysis of \textit{The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith}. This film is the only Australian film, except the biographies, which is based on real events: the murders committed by the Governor brothers in the last year of Australia being officially divided into colonies. \textit{The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith} is also the only Australian historical film to squarely confront the impact of colonisation on the
Australian Aboriginal peoples. Finally, we will examine a third film, *Indochine*, which is an entirely fictional story set during the first years that the entrenched French colonial population began to suspect that its continued dominance over the indigenous Indochinese would not endure. *Indochine* is also structured narratively into a double periodisation: the main body of the story takes place in the 1930s, the main character intervenes from time to time from Geneva in 1954 and the film was produced in 1990. The choice of these three films provides the opportunity to compare findings from three different filmic approaches to the colonial issue.

**Coup de torchon: America's south in French West Africa**

*Coup de torchon* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1981) is set in French West Africa in 1938. The story it recounts is not only entirely fictional, but is adapted from a novel set in the Southern United States in the 1920s, *Pop. 1280* by Jim Thompson. One can see immediately that the story itself is not specific to its filmic location. Neither did the director claim to have any specific interest in representing the colonial past. In an interview with the author of this study, Bertrand Tavernier said that he wanted firstly to make a film of *Pop. 1280* because of his admiration for Jim Thompson, but he could not set it in France because of the need for large unpopulated areas where corpses could lie around unseen. This would be less believable in France due to its population density. Secondly, he wanted to make a film in Africa because of the strong light. Given this pre-production context, it will be important to determine if and how *Coup de torchon* achieves a believable representation of colonial life. For instance, Serge le Péron in his critique of the film in *Positif* questions the lack of connection between the white characters and their African setting:

Tavernier films Africa oddly like a land which you cannot communicate with: not as the colony period in which the film's action is carefully set nor in its contemporary form (we are still waiting for a filming of Africa which would dare to go beyond Rouch) all the while Tavernier films white characters on an African background, he is shielding them in his way, pulling them out of this setting.
But Tavernier is unlikely to be creating this land/coloniser partition by chance. Surely the detachment of the white characters is very deliberate, and the film reflects how little Tavernier feels the French ever belonged in Africa.

*Coup de torchon* opens with an unusual scene, before the credits, showing a solar eclipse. We see some African children playing, being watched by a shabbily-dressed European, played by Philippe Noiret. When it becomes dark, he lights a fire for the children, but moves away from them. This scene, to which we return at the close, is completely invented for the film. It establishes the setting on African soil, and in so doing, encapsulates the essence of colonialism. The representative of white authority acts for what he believes is the good of the natives, who are seen as children, but does not desire direct personal contact with them. The image fades to black and the credits begin against this background. At this stage the spectator has been able to identify the location as African by the children's physiognomy and from the dry landscape, but not the date. To this point, the only possible indicator as to the dating is the clothing, but neither those of Cordier, Noiret's character, nor the minimal traditional garments worn by the children, give a hint.

After the credits, Cordier appears again, and a superimposed caption appears:

*Afrique Occidentale Française*  
*juillet 1938*

The spectator now knows the precise period of the film's setting, fourteen months before the beginning of the Second World War, and just under two years before the Germans marched into Paris.

In *Coup de torchon*, Tavernier also draws attention to the year 1938 in several intradiegetic ways. By including the initial caption, he is clearly showing that he considers this information to be important in the overall interpretation of the film. Within the film, the first indication as to the date takes place 33 minutes in, when Lucien Cordier's wife, played by Stéphane Audran, justifies stealing Lucien's money.
because of the war which is looming. The impending war in Europe is mentioned several more times, and at the end of the film, it appears to have started. During this first half-hour of the film, it would have been difficult to have guessed the year without the caption. The streets of Bourkassa are bare not just of cars, but of any transport except carts. This indicates poverty more than the period. Western clothing is a convention used to signify eras, but the shabby clothes worn by Lucien, his wife and her live-in boyfriend do not point necessarily to the late 1930s. The hat worn by the new schoolteacher is round in the style of Western female fashion of this period. Her offer to lend Lucien a new book written by an aviator may also be an indicator, to the literature-reading spectator, of a new book by Antoine de St-Exupéry, who began publishing his books during the 1930s.

In addition to the extra and intradiagetic textual indicators of the setting year in *Coup de torchon*, the third type of explicit indicator is visual. In the scene of the outdoor cinema, there is a poster advertising *L'Affaire du courrier de Lyon*, directed by Maurice Lehmann and Claude Autant-Lara, which was released in 1937. In addition to this poster, the film which is shown is *Alerte en Méditerranée*, directed by Léo Joannon, which was released in 1938. Shortly after this scene, Lucien is teaching Rose how to shoot. The target is a poster of the profile of a soldier wearing the helmet of the colonial army with the caption: “Enrol in the colonial troops” (“Inscrivez-vous dans les troupes coloniales”).

All these specific references have obviously been added by Bertrand Tavernier and Jean Aurenche when they were adapting the scenario from the Thompson novel. Tavernier and Aurenche have transferred this story from 1920s Alabama into a specific period in French colonial history. The year 1938 is the year of the Munich Agreement in which England, France, Italy and Germany agreed to Germany's claim to the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. It is also around the time when French films
on colonisation in Africa were at their peak. In 1937, twelve such films were released, and in 1938, at least five. Many of these films built up an exotic image of the North African colonies and made Africa an inviting place to live in as a colonial settler. What Bertrand Tavernier seems to want to emphasise in *Coup de torchon* is the corruption and decadence of the French expatriate communities.

This situation of decline is brought to the foreground in *Coup de torchon*. Lucien Cordier, the local police officer, accepts bribes from brothel owners. His amorality eventually leads him to commit several murders and simultaneously to believe he is Jesus. In a macabre fashion, Lucien Cordier's character is emblematic of European colonialism itself. The Christian missionaries of the “civilising mission” were spreading the Word of Jesus to the indigenous peoples of the colonies while the soldiers and settlers simultaneously were killing them. The seemingly unbreachable chasm between the ideology of colonialism and the actual practice of colonisation is symptomatic of a serious breakdown in the unity of the whole colonial operation. An individual with such an inconsistent behavioural pattern is classified as schizophrenic or sociopathic. Lucien Cordier most likely is the sociopath, since it is they who are able to reason out their actions. If Cordier is understood to be the embodiment of colonialism, then his character suggests that European colonialism was collective sociopathy. By situating this film just before the advent of World War Two, Tavernier seems to suggest that although the war may have been the catalyst in the collapse of the French Empire, this Empire was already on the brink of collapse anyway.

**The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith: from history to novel to screen**

The collective colonial sociopathy of *Coup de torchon* is echoed in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Although the content of these two films is very different, the overall general picture they portray of colonialism is strikingly similar. This is all the
more interesting given that, while *Coup de torchon* is entirely fictional, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is based on documented events.21 These are referred to only generally in the caption following the credit for screenplay and novel:

> based on real events that took place in Australia at the turn of the century.

This is the sole extradiegetic indicator in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* to its historical basis. The caption follows a pre-credits sequence which alternates between a young Aboriginal boy going through the rituals of tribal initiation, and a pastor wondering why the boy has been missing from home for six weeks. The most obvious indicator of the period is the long dress and style of hair worn by the pastor's wife.

After the credits, we find that the young black boy is now an adult around ten years older, and that he is called Jimmie Blacksmith. Although we have learned that the story is set “around the turn of the century”, there is no special meaning attached to this date until Jimmie needs to go to the council office to get instructions on fence-building. Two men, one English, and the other Australian-born of English descent, are arguing about the impact Federation will have. From this information, the viewer can determine that the year is 1900, since Federation took place on the 1st January, 1901 and, from the conversation, Federation is imminent, it is not just a topic of debate.

This topic is again introduced into the story when Jimmie has become an assistant police officer with Her Majesty's Constabulary. The sergeant does not believe Federation will work, and cites the problems that this led to in the United States. He asks Jimmie his opinion:

| Sergeant: | Yeah, but not for you black bastards. Wouldn't be any different for you, would it? I suppose you'd have the same rights . . . none! |
| Jimmie: | You reckon, Mister? |
| Sergeant: | Well, not that it matters. Not enough of you to be worried about, anyway. |
This brief dialogue exchange is important in that now Federation is no longer just an event external to the film's narrative. It demonstrates the relationship between the narrative and the major political date in Australia's history. We have seen up to this point how Jimmie has no rights as an Aborigine, even though his father is white, and he has been brought up by the pastor. The settlers for whom he has built fences have both cheated him, because they knew he had no legal recourse. Jimmie's response also draws attention to three important elements. Firstly, his political awareness, which contradicts the stereotypical labels attached to him in the film as an “ignorant black”. Secondly, he provides us with one of the basic points of the argument for the benefits of federating: free trade between the states. Finally, we see the paradox between his understanding that Federation will benefit all Australians, but that he, because of his Aboriginal heritage, is not part of this “all”. The conversations about Federation in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith are revealing themselves to be political signposts integrated into the narrative and contrasting with the reality of Jimmie's life. The film thus reveals also its principal fictional mechanism. By inventing new names for the characters, the film distances itself from the actual events, allowing the story to have much greater freedom in the dramatisation and therefore in the desired emotional impact. This technique also has the effect of transforming Jimmie Blacksmith into a symbol of the general Aboriginal situation of the time. If the story had instead strongly identified with the real events by, for example, retaining the original names of those involved, these events would have been perceived as exceptional, and would not have attained a symbolic value.

The political message of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith comes to the fore in the sequence three-quarters of the way into the film (87 minutes out of 120). Jimmie and his tribal brother Mort have taken a school teacher as a hostage, and are hiding in the forest. McCready, the school teacher, introduces the topic of colonisation:
McCready: I can understand you being angry. I can imagine it, Jimmie. Settlers still spoke of marauding blacks only ten years ago. How many whites ever got killed by Aborigines? No-one will ever know. Four or five thousand.

Jimmie: Not enough.

McCready: Well, you might ask, how many Aborigines did the whites kill? A quarter of a million.

Mort: More than that.

McCready: Two hundred and seventy thousand. I can understand you being angry.

Jimmie: They took away our way of life! What harm had we done?

McCready: Well, you can't say we haven't given you something. We've introduced you to alcohol, influenza, measles, syphilis, school. A whole host of improvements.

*He lies down on the forest floor.*

No school tomorrow. 22

McCready provides a summary of the impact of colonisation on the original inhabitants of Australia. In so doing, he transforms Jimmie's murders into representative political acts. We have already, at this point in the film, witnessed the specific injustices that motivated the character's savage response, but now we are forced to review it on a broader historical and political level.

This sequence especially illustrates the relationship between the setting date of the film, 1900, and its release date, 1978. It is highly improbable that this conversation took place in 1900, as the sentiment it evokes is quite the opposite of that of the times. Richard Broome comments on the various scientific arguments conceived in the last quarter of the nineteenth century justifying the treatment of the Aborigines:

> By 1900, most European Australians held racist views towards Aboriginal Australians, based on ignorance, a lack of sympathy, on fanciful racial theories, and on the need to rationalise the dispossession of the Aborigines' land. Indeed, European Australians were obsessed by the notion of race, a common complaint at the time in most of Western society. 23

But the point in Jimmie Blacksmith is not so much whether this conversation took place or not, but rather why it could not have taken place. The fundamental Christian values underpinning the religion and ethics of turn-of-the-century society were those still adhered to in 1978, and possibly today. The story makes a point of highlighting the
presence and influence of the religions imported from Great Britain. The Reverend Neville is a Methodist minister who brought up Jimmie with his wife. All three pastoralists who cheat Jimmie on the fencing contracts make explicit references to their Protestant religion, despite showing few actual Christian values such as honesty, charity, forgiveness and so on. The teacher voices the reality which could not be voiced in 1900, a point even admitted by the book’s author after his viewing of the film:

I think there is a slight tendency to abstract from that event of 1900 and put a black power relevance on what happened in 1900 and to use the terms of black power at a stage of history when they would not have been consciously used by anyone.24

Thomas Keneally was speaking six years after the novel was published and with the objectivity that this time span had produced, and also the experience of seeing a story conceived as written text, retold on the screen through the eyes of a filmmaker. But although the film was critically acclaimed and was accepted for competition in Cannes in 1978, it failed at the box office.25 It was withdrawn from the cinemas after twelve weeks. Fred Schepisi had perhaps hoped that the Australian people in 1978 were able to face some unpalatable details of their colonial past, but he appeared to have misjudged them.

**Indochine: a stand-in for history?**

*Indochine* is quite different from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in that the film has no literary antecedent, is entirely fictional, and did well at the box office. It was also awarded the Oscar for Best Foreign Film in 1991. Yet, it is also a film which depicts indefensible treatment of indigenous people. It associates its story intimately with the actual events leading to the granting of independence to Vietnam in 1954. It does this in a way not found in any of the other films, and that is to make the main action of the film a flashback to the 1930s, but being told from the 1950s. This double historical periodisation has the effect that the spectator is doubly distanced from the principal action. The film is released in 1991, narrated from 1954, about events taking
place in the 1930s. A possible advantage to this narrative structure may be the way it
distances the contemporary spectator from the harsher events that are depicted in the
1930s setting. Catherine Deneuve’s character, Éliane, could be seen as a kind of
narrative insulator, cushioning the impact of past events carried out with official
sanction, or at least without official reprimand.

The first and most obvious indicator of the film's historical setting is its very
title, *Indochine*, Vietnam's former name under colonial France. The opening sequences
of the film give us no explicit references to the date. We see a large and solemn
procession of Vietnamese-style boats moving across a misty bay or lake. The music
reinforces this solemn atmosphere as we see various shots of the boats, the people on
them, and then two highly-ornate coffins. The musical piece introduces violins and the
camera stops on the veiled face of the well-known actress, Catherine Deneuve. We
hear her voice as she explains the situation, and her use of the past tense signifies that
her narrative is told as a flashback, although we are given no clue as to the period when
her narrative is being told. What we understand then is that the events we see depicted
in the film are her memories, and the consequence of this is that Deneuve’s character’s
memories also become the viewer’s, since these memories are their only source of
knowledge of the events.

This narrative strategy is one of the main objections made about the film by
Panivong Norindr:

The viewer quickly realises that the preceding shots were seen from Éliane's vantage point and
organised from her point of view as well. As both protagonist and narrator, she exerts complete
control over the filmic narration, its development, its resolution. (...) Through a mechanism of cinematic identification such as “suture”, Éliane becomes the
embodiment of the French colony in symbol and image, the “colonial Marianne”; simply put, she personifies Indochina.26

It is true that if we only saw images through the prism of Éliane's memory, the overall
representation of the historical events in this story would be as suspect as Norindr
believes them to be. But as we will see shortly, Éliane's perspective is not the only one
the film has. She is not present in every scene and therefore these scenes obviously
cannot be part of her direct memory. She could have learned of those scenes from
Tanh's mother or from Jean-Baptiste second-hand, but she could not have learned of
Camille's experiences in the north. Thus the story manages to give a broader
perspective of Indochinese history than its use of a narrator would imply, although
ultimately, the story is still told from the perspective of a European director.

No dates are supplied in any form at all during the narrative; it is only at the
commencement of the closing credits that we learn the date from a caption:

The next day, the 21st of July 1954, the Geneva Conference was over, ending
15 years of turmoil and inaugurating the division into two separate states of what would be called once
more VIETNAM. 27

There are visual clues to the period such as fashions, houses and motor cars, and
narrative clues such as the official superiority of whites over Asians. This is obvious in
their status as servants, and most poignantly in the scene where the naval officer, Jean-
Baptiste, orders a Vietnamese-owned boat to be burned on the spot for trafficking in
opium. This is perhaps also the most significant sequence which introduces us to the
core characteristic of colonialism, its distinct segregation of coloniser from colonised.
The boat owners have no recourse to justice - in other words, no rights.

It is the many references to the documented historical events external to the
narrative which give us the most explicit clues to the period. This is similar to The
Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith. Both this film and Indochine prefer to attain
verisimilitude for their fictional stories by having their characters refer to the major
events of their period, as one would have expected people living in the colonial era to
have done. The first such reference is made by the Security Forces Chief (Chef de
Sûreté), Guy Asselin, whom Éliane meets on the verandah of a luxury hotel in Saïgon.
She inquires about the serious expression on his face and he replies:

This time it's serious. In Canton, the offensive is ready. Communists and Nationalists in
complete agreement. With Moscow's blessing. 28
Up to this point in the film (about 27 minutes out of 156), we have been introduced primarily to Éliane's world. She is in control of a 6000 hectare rubber plantation worked by a large number of tenant workers, inhabits a large and luxurious house with her father and adopted Vietnamese daughter, has an art collection and likes dancing. In short, she lives an exceptionally privileged lifestyle. We have perhaps also made the association between Éliane as both main character and narrator in the future, and the film's title. As Panivong Norindr points out above, Éliane in the film is Indochina. The depiction of her life is metonymical of the peak of colonial life. Having built up the image of this apparently perfect ecology, we discover that all along, from Guy Asselin's words, “this time”, it has been under increasingly serious threat of destruction from outside forces. This is perhaps the most telling revelation about the ideological position of the film. The filmmaker has established the spectator's vision of the colony, firstly, from the specific perspective of a wealthy and successful colonist and, secondly, by using France's best-known female actress to further engender sympathy and identification with the character. Then he reveals that the indigenous people are planning to revolt. The viewers’ natural reaction will be hostility to them.

Will this necessarily be the case? The external historical events are integrated into the narrative for the first time when Tanh returns unexpectedly from France. The scene is again on the hotel balcony in Saïgon. Éliane is with Camille and Tanh, and Guy Asselin joins them. He explains that Tanh has been deported “définitivement” - permanently - from France for demonstrating against the government. He discovers immediately that Éliane has been hiding all news of indigenous unrest from Camille:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Guy:} \hspace{1cm} (to Éliane) She knows about Sen Bay?
\textbf{Éliane:} No.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Guy:} It's her country! She has a right to know! Three months ago, Indochinese troops massacred their French superiors. We found the murderers. The case was closed. Not at all! There were demonstrations in Paris, the demonstrators were jailed. The case was closed. Not at all! It triggered off a movement of solidarity. They marched up to the Elysée. And Tanh was with them. So he was kicked out too.
\end{quote}
Camille: And now?

Tanh: And now it's finished, Camille. I was bad and I have been punished.29

In the next brief scene which completes this sequence, Tanh says to Camille on the dance floor inside the hotel, away from the ears of Éliane and Guy:

On the boat coming back, I thought about our childhood here. Soon this land will be ours again.30

These dialogues produce a considerable shift in the narrative's perspective. Guy Asselin's character in the film as Security Forces Chief embodies the colonial force whose role is to maintain France's dominance in Indochina. In saying, “It's her country”, he is acknowledging, quite surprisingly, that the country does not belong to France. His account of the massacre reveals France's progressive loss of control. Each time when the French believed they had contained the incident, they realised that this was “not at all” the case. Guy does not conclude his dialogue with a third “Not at all!”, however. It seems as if he accepts that the situation is not any longer a safely closed case. At the same time as we witness this ambivalent attitude toward the French occupation of another people’s country, the discussion continues into a different setting in which, for the first time, Éliane is not present. When Tanh reveals his belief in regaining the land to Camille, Éliane loses her monopoly on the narrative. This scene is not a part of her memory, it provides another perspective to it.

After this point in the story, the crises which have so far only been mentioned in conversation by the characters become part of the main narrative. A Mandarin, member of the local elite, is shot dead in front of Éliane and her father; one of their plantation barns is set on fire; and finally, Camille faints in the street after a prisoner is shot and falls on her, covering her with blood. This third scene in the sequence of three showing these attacks on the colonial infrastructure is the catalyst for Camille beginning a love affair with Jean-Baptiste, Éliane’s lover.
This sudden alliance with Jean-Baptiste opens the way for Camille to challenge the authority of her adoptive mother, Éliane, and to discover the reality of Vietnam for herself. Camille is unaware at first that Jean-Baptiste is Éliane's lover, and that the resulting conflict between him and Éliane leads to his transfer to Dragon Island in the north of the country. Camille decides to go after him, following her marriage with Tanh. At this point, for the first time, the camera shows a scene with Éliane in her role as narrator, looking back from many years later. She is telling her story to a young boy of around twenty years old, who is of obvious mixed European-Vietnamese heritage. In the scene which follows, the film shifts to Camille's journey across the country in search of Jean-Baptiste. For the next forty minutes of narrative time, Éliane does not appear in the film.

*Indochine* could have easily degenerated from this point on into a colonial love fantasy, avoiding any representation of the ideologically sensitive realities of the French presence. It is far from the claims of Panivong Norindr:

Indochine is not about French colonialism in Indochina at all; it is about Wargnier's fantasies of colonial Indochina. Critical and popular acclaim notwithstanding, Wargnier's re-presentation of Indochina exerts a dangerous fascination precisely because it brings visual pleasure without questioning or subverting any preconceived ideas about French colonial rule in Southeast Asia.31

The scene at the slave market exposes one of the least-acknowledged activities of French colonialism in contemporary France, and thus undermines Norindr's argument. The scene does “subvert preconceived ideas”. The slave-market sequence also counter-balances Éliane's nostalgia as narrator, and shows that the film pays far more attention to documented history than other critics have claimed.32

Camille joined a family escaping from forced labour, and grows attached to them as they share their journey to the north. They all are caught and end up in the slave markets on Dragon Island. In the sales, the husband and wife are separated, and they both protest. Jean-Baptiste is present, being part of the colonial presence to maintain order during the sales, which are to benefit the plantation owners. It is
through his eyes that we first see the horror of the treatment of recalcitrant Vietnamese. He looks down into the water and sees a man and woman incarcerated separately in cages. On the exterior of the woman's cage is her son, shot dead and tied there. Jean-Baptiste closes his eyes and reopens them several times. He cannot accept or believe what he is seeing. As one of the major characters, Jean-Baptiste's actions are closely identified with by the viewers. His disbelief is also theirs: did that really happen under French rule? His fellow officer explains the reason this was carried out, and his detachment and obvious sense of having done the right thing is even more horrible than the deed. Jean-Baptiste looks away and sees Camille among the seated slaves awaiting sale. He removes her and brings her back to the bridge where she consequently sees the fate of the family she had got to know so well. She screams and ends up killing the officer who was responsible. In a fraction of a second, she makes the final step in her transition from a privileged member of Indochina's elite to a committed fighter against France's colonial presence.

The only flaw in this scene perhaps is its lack of believability. It is coincidental that firstly, Camille manages to get to Dragon Island, second, that the family she got to know were the only ones punished, and thirdly, that Jean-Baptiste could identify her among a crowd of Vietnamese to whom he would not normally have paid much attention. This is not so important, however. What is important is that the film found a way to show the stark reality of colonialism in French Indochina. We understand the brutal nature of the structures which allowed people such as Éliane to live in the manner they did. Her own workers, as seen in a scene near the beginning of the film, were not permitted to leave the plantation, or she beat them. They were forced labour, and very possibly could have been procured from a similar slave market.

During the remainder of the film, we are still without any precise dating. Does the film assume the audience would be able to guess? It is close to the film's end when
viewers with some knowledge of French political history can estimate the date within a year or two. The *Front Populaire* government gave amnesty in 1936 to the political prisoners in the Poulo-Condore prison. It is only after the closing scene that we are actually given a specific day and specific historical event. Éliane is in Geneva, and it has been from there all along that she has been telling her story to Etienne, the now young-adult son of Camille and Jean-Baptiste. Camille, Éliane informs Etienne, is in the hotel as part of the Indochinese delegation sent to sign the official independence agreement from France. Éliane does not wish to look for Camille, and Etienne makes an attempt, but returns unsuccessful. He informs Éliane that he considers her his mother, not Camille. As Éliane turns her back to the camera and gazes at the misty *Lac Léman*, the caption about the Geneva Conference appears. Thus we learn only at the beginning of the final credits that the entire story we have already seen is the dramatisation of the events leading up to this agreement, seen retrospectively from that date. No mention is made of the culminating battle of Diên Biên Phu, on the 7th of May of the same year, but *Indochine* is nevertheless making a tight link between its fictional narrative and actual events. One can imagine that, for most of the audience, who are not knowledgeable in the history of Indochina, the film becomes history’s substitute. As we mentioned in footnote 32, two historians are credited as historical advisers for this film, Nelly Krowolski and Benjamin Stora. This is a sign that the filmmaker was reasonably concerned with historical veracity, and that consequently, the historical events referred to in the film have some substance.

**Questioning History?**

Two of the three films in this chapter have stories which are specific to their historical colonial setting - *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Indochine*. Neither of these two depict actual events, but they identify their fictional narratives with historical
events which affected colonisation. *Coup de torchon* does this too, but with a story transferred from a setting in America, and therefore not specific to colonial French West Africa. The narrative in *Coup de torchon* nevertheless establishes itself as a believable representation of colonial life and succeeds in being relevant to the history of colonialism in general. The reason it can be transposed from America to Africa is because both colonial societies were structured first and foremost by the common racial division which automatically endowed Europeans with power over non-Europeans, and the corrupting effect of this power is the central theme of the story.

One of the most important revelations coming from this chapter is the general aversion of both France and Australia to depicting actual events. Michèle Lagny comments on a similar trait of the French colonial film, which, contrary to the American Western, alludes to confrontations rather than represents them, thus preventing the “cultural Other” from having access to official modes of depiction. The postcolonial films appear to almost unanimously continue this tradition of allusion in preference to representation both in France and in Australia. But this observation does not explain satisfactorily the reason for the aversion to showing actual historical events. The Westerns, in showing battles with Indians, hardly portray them with any sympathy, and in Pierre Schoendoerffer's *Diên Biên Phu*, the Vietnamese are hardly seen. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is far more confronting in its depiction of colonial violence. One important thing to ask is perhaps whether the films ask questions about the past, or whether they, in the words of film historian Robert Rosenstone, “deliver it in a highly developed, polished form that serves to suppress rather than raise questions” Films such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* obviously ask questions about the past, but what can we say about films such as *Indochine* or *Coup de torchon*? Do these two films reassure the viewers of their history, or do they force them to rethink it?
We could argue from our discussions that these two films do lead the viewer to reconsider certain assumptions. We know that Éliane’s workers are forced to stay on the plantation, and that the clients at the Dragon Island slavemarket are plantation owners. *Indochine* reveals that Éliane’s idyllic colonial world has been founded on the mistreatment of Indochina's indigenous people. In *Coup de torchon* Lucien Cordier is a murderer, all the more dangerous because he believes his murders are justifiable. But he does not have the moral vision to see that where before existed a couple of pimps, two adulteresses, a wife-beater, and an African stripped of his dignity, there now exists a systematic killer. Fictional images are all the more powerful nevertheless because, without a specific historical base, their symbolism can extend more easily to other comparable situations. If it is feasible that the power conferred on Lucien Cordier can corrupt him, then by extrapolation one can imagine similar office holders in other colonial societies being equally corrupted. If we refer just to the two other films in this chapter, we see evidence of this symbolic extension. The Sergeant in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* holds a similar position to Lucien Cordier, and he has been corrupted. In *Indochine*, the French army officers who organise the slave markets have also been corrupted by the invincibility resulting from the official colonial division rendering the French superior to the native Indochinese. Thus, although these films have not taken on an actual event as their theme, they do still have the power to coerce viewers into rethinking their own impressions of colonial history. Although these films have minimal direct identification with the documented colonial past, their narratives can still potentially provoke the same questions as if they did. As we continue this study, we will find out if this does indeed prove the case.

2 The first, *La Question* (Laurent Heynemann, 1977), is based on Henri Alleg’s autobiography depicting his experiences during the French-Algerian war. The second is *Dien Bien Phu* (Pierre Schoendoerffer,
depicting a key battle during the French-Indochina war in 1954. The French colonial war films are being studied by Katherine Thornton of Adelaide University History Department in her PhD thesis. 

The same year, a comic version of this story was released under the title of Wills and Burke, directed by Bob Weis.

4To quote Scott Murray in “Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s”, in Scott Murray (ed.), Australian Cinema, St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1984, pp. 71-149: “Richardson's film is of interest primarily because it recounts one of the iconographic stories of white Australian history. But it was galling to many to have it made by the English, and starring as the Australian bushranger the singularly inappropriate Mick Jagger (who never jettisons his rock persona). Richardson also seemed to take little interest in historical accuracy and was heavily criticised for his 'dilletantish' view.” (p. 72)

5This film recounts the story of a soldier sent at the end of the nineteenth century to the disciplinary battalions of North Africa, known as “Biribi”. Unfortunately, we have been unable to find a copy of it to view, including at the Archives du Centre National de la Cinématographie and in the audiovisual collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

6Translation by John Emerson from: “...librement inspiré du Journal du Chevalier de Boufflers et des travaux de Jean-Louis Leconte, Jean-Louis Bertuccelli et Chantal Villepontoux-Chastel.” According to the Petit Larousse Illustre, 1977, Stanislaus Jean, chevalier de Boufflers, was born in Nancy in 1738 and died in 1815. He was Field Marshal (maréchal de camp) and Governor of Senegal, especially known for his light poetry and short stories, and was admitted to the French Academy.

7Charles de Foucauld was born in Paris in 1858 and was assassinated in Tamanrasset, Algeria, in 1916. He was an explorer in Morocco and a missionary in Algeria. His life was the subject of Léon Poirier's 1936 film, L'Appel du silence (winner of the Grand Prix du cinéma français, 1936).

8Louis Hubert Lyautey was born in Nancy in 1854 and died in 1934. He first distinguished himself in Indochina (Tonkin). He established and maintained the French presence in Morocco from 1912 to 1925, and became a member of the Académie française.

9Bassek ba Kobhio was assistant-director to Claire Denis on Chocolat. Albert Schweitzer's life was the subject of André Haguet's film, Il est minuit docteur Schweitzer, released in 1952.

10See the introduction to Ryan, Lyndall. The Aboriginal Tasmanians. 2nd ed. St Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1996.

11This is the fourth film version of the Captain Starlight character from the novel by Rolf Boldrewood. The other films were released in (all of the same title) 1907, 1920 and 1957. The continuity of this character over a period of almost a century could be argued to demonstrate the continued admiration of Australians for people who refuse to take society's institutions too seriously.


13The primary delimitation being that a film’s theme and central focus is on a story taking place during the colonial period. Outside of the corpus the opposite is the case. Just to cite a few prominent examples: Newsfront (set in several time spans linked to real events in Australia such as the referendum to ban the Communist Party, the Maitland floods and the Olympic Games in 1956); The Odd Angry Shot (set in Vietnam during the war); Breaker Morant (set during the Boer War in South Africa, 1901; Gallipoli (set in WW1, in Turkey).

14To name just a few examples, Breaker Morant and Gallipoli (op. cit., note 16), Careful He Might Hear You (Aussie battlers in the 1930s), Strikebound (a 1930s miners' strike), Phar Lap (the racing horse), The Picture Show Man (a travelling cinema operator in the 1920s), My Brilliant Career (the life of writer, Miles Franklin).

15The early colonial period has been treated in television series, for example in Women of the Sun (1982). In Alinta: 1836, the first sixty minute episode of four, an Aboriginal tribe is destroyed for defending their land against invading whites.


17Interview with Bertrand Tavernier, conducted at the Capitaine Conan set in Aubervilliers, 11th January 1996.


19According to the listings in Pierre Boulanger, Le Cinéma colonial : de l’Atlantide à Lawrence d’Arabie, Paris, Seghers, 1975. The films include Pierre Billon’s Courrier-sud, adapted from St-Exupéry’s novel of the same name. Other directors include Christian-Jaque (Un de la légion), Julien Duvivier (Pépé le Moko) and Pierre Chenal (La Maison du Maltais). Compare the thirty years 1970-2000 that it took in
both France and Australia to produce around a dozen films on the colonial era to the one single year, 1937.  

20This is exactly the same as the novel, set in Alabama. It should be remembered that blacks were legally distinguished from the whites as second-class citizens in the USA until 1964. That year President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act forbidding discrimination in public places (source: internet site www.britannica.com; search string “discrimination United States”). America in practice was therefore still firmly in a colonial social structure.  

21 Pauline Kael, “A Dreamlike Requiem Mass for a Nation’s Lost Honour”, Moran, Albert & O’Regan, Tom (eds.) An Australian Film Reader, Sydney, Currency, 1985, pp. 204-210. “The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith” was adapted from Thomas Keneally’s novel, which is based on the case of Jimmie Governor, a half Aboriginal who went on a rampage and killed seven whites in 1900, the very year of Federation. (His hanging was delayed until after the ceremonies, so as not to embarrass the proud young nation by reminding it of what had been done to the natives.)” P. 204  

22This dialogue appears in the film virtually word for word as it appears in the novel.  


25To quote just two critics after its release, Pauline Kael called the film “A Dreamlike Requiem Mass for a nation’s Lost Honour” (New Yorker, 15 September 1980, p. 148; reprinted in Moran and O’Regan, An Australian Film Reader, cf. footnote 28) and David Stratton comments: “The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is, indeed, a fine film. Schepisi and his brilliant cameraman, Ian Baker, have crafted a visually breathtaking canvas as a background to a gripping and distressing story of racial bigotry and a terrible revenge for the wrongs done to a whole race.” Tim Burstall, “In a Hostile World”. In Moran, Albert & O’Regan, Tom (eds.), An Australian Film Reader, op cit., pp. 136-137.  

26Panivong Norindr. “Filmic Memorial and Colonial Blues: Indochina in Contemporary French Cinema”. In Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism. Austin, University of Texas, 1996, pp. 120-146. This citation from pp. 123-124. We should also add that the character Marianne symbolises the French Republic, and that Deneuve served as the model for the Marianne busts found in the local council offices across France.  

27 “Le lendemain, le 21 juillet 1954, s’achevait la Conférence de Genève qui mettait fin à 15 ans de déchirement et scellait le partage en deux états distincts de ce qui s’appellerait de nouveau le VIETNAM.” Translated from the SBS subtitles.  

28The English quotations from the subtitled French films in this study are a combination of the translation provided plus translations by the author of any omitted or summarised segments.  

29 English dialogues as appear in the sub-titles provided by SBS Television, Australia.  

30 Ibid.  

31Panivong Norindr, op. cit., p. 127.  


Chapter 2

Filmic Treatment of the Colonial Landscape

The single topos which unifies all the films in our corpus without exception is the presence of the colonial landscape. The degree of this presence varies but in no film is it merely a background setting, it is always an important component both of the narrative and of the cinematography. The landscape topos is not, of course, peculiar to the films in our corpus. Landscape plays an indispensable role in films of many genres, so we need to determine what its specific role is in our selection of films depicting the colonial past. It is of interest that, in spite of the rapid development of city spaces, these films show a great attachment to the open spaces of early settlement. In only one French film in the chosen corpus does urban life dominate, in The Lover/L’Amant, - Saigon - and in no Australian film, despite more than 80% of Australia’s contemporary population being urban. Why do the films favour areas unsettled by whites?

We will be focussing on six films in which the landscape presence is especially striking. In the two Australian films, Walkabout and Picnic at Hanging Rock, the landscape is more than just a unifying backdrop around which the rest of the film is organised. Landscape in these two films is the antagonist, the main driving force, and accordingly demands lengthy analyses. The four French films we have chosen take a different approach. In each of these films, landscape is a powerful integral component, but not the principal driving force. The first film that we discuss is Chocolat, which has attracted attention from two feminist analysts for the depiction of its landscape in the part of French West Africa now known as Cameroon. Next, we return to Indochine to examine the range of different settings in the French colonies grouped together since 1954 as Vietnam. The following two films, Fort Saganne and Les Caprices d’un fleuve.
both have narratives set partly in the Sahara Desert and modern Senegal. In both films
the main character is tested against the harsh desert environment to see if he, and by
extension, France, are worthy conquerors.

**Defining Landscape**

As a result of the widespread use of the term “landscape” across the disciplines, it needs to be defined with respect to its use within the confines of this work. The term has its origins in fine art where it has been used to denote paintings depicting nature. The concept of nature is, however, ambiguous. In *Landscape as Art*, Kenneth Clark describes nature as an idea we use to cover “things which we have not made and which have a life and structure different from our own: trees, flowers, grasses, rivers, hills, clouds”\(^2\). Clark argues that it is important to understand nature as an idea, and not as actual “things”, and that landscape painting is an activity which contributes to this idea, that is, to the representation of nature. The term “landscape” used by itself implies nature as we experience it, rather than nature itself.

Landscape has tended also to be a term which implies the existence of a fundamental division between humans and their experienced environment. This is a concept which originates in the Old Testament with its very description of the creation of the Earth:

\[
\text{Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.}^3
\]

Humans were created on the sixth day quite separately according to Genesis and, as this passage affirms, humans were to have control over everything else, including “over all the earth”.

In the modern Western philosophical tradition, Jean-Jacques Wunenberger identifies Descartes as being a major non-secular perpetrator of this idea, conceiving
landscape as “an autonomous space with substance, endowed with specific and objective laws”.

Wunenberger argues that Cartesian dualism reproduces itself institutionally in the disciplines of geography, cartography, engineering and urban planning. He also finds dualism present within the green movement. Whereas the scientific disciplines adopt a paternalistic approach to dominating the landscape, environmentalists view it more as a nurturing maternal figure. The two positions, which are opposed on the political and economic planes, share the common belief that humans are distinct from the rest of the world. Wunenberger argues that this dichotomy is illusory, and that a conceptual revolution is necessary to overcome it:

This epistemological reversal consists then less of complicating or philosophising about the relationships between man and his landscapes, than inversing the very principle of objectivity and arguing that nature is nothing but a representation of the subject, a construction of man, and that the conditions of perception of a landscape in our attachment to the world consist less in the intrinsic laws of phenomena and natural forms than in the depths of our “psyche”.

By erasing the dichotomy between Man and Nature, Wunenberger is challenging the primary ontological tradition of Western culture. Significantly, his view is closer to the world view of many of the “primitive” cultures subjected to European colonialism, most notably, that of Australian Aborigines, which encompasses humans as a part of the natural order and not as separate from it.

But even more significant is the argument that landscape is nothing else but an extension of the human mind. Wunenberger continues:

A landscape in fact never exists as a thing in itself endowed with immanent qualities to which one would have to submit oneself; it only exists as occupied, invested, proportioned by a subject, for whom alone it can become centre or periphery, place of rest or from which to escape.

This perspective is important in the analysis of landscapes, because it means that the elements represented within them echo the mental states of the artist and her or his society. These elements are thus coded with meaning, and as such, if appropriately decoded, should be able to reveal even the most hidden, unconscious concerns of this society.
It is ill-advised, however, to see landscapes as mere representations of mental states. Wunenberger warns against a solipsistic slide into “... a reassuring theoretical domain, and even worn-out, according to which any landscape is the product of a mental state.” Landscapes need to be seen as the product of a dynamic relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. This means that to interpret a landscape, one needs to analyse how it is perceived rather than what is being perceived. Psychoanalytically-influenced interpretations sometimes confuse the “how” and the “what”, making the error of presupposing that every element in a representation is entirely a figure of the artist’s imagination, rather than a response to an external stimulus. For example, E. Ann Kaplan in her analysis of Chocolat, interprets a hill behind the Dalens’s house as being “phallus-shaped”, and uses this to found an argument that France has lost its virility. If the argument is somewhat tedious, it is that the hill in question, phallus-shaped as it is, does not appear to be threatening, as is the similar feature in Picnic in Hanging Rock. Furthermore, it is not clear that the sequences showing the rock in Chocolat are edited in such a way as to provoke necessarily such an interpretation. Wunenberger advises:

It is important therefore to detach this oneiric geography from any confusion with a sort of imaginary museum, archives where the pictures of the world and their accompanying dreams would be kept. The active and perceptive appropriation of space employs on the contrary the totality of what we are; we do not collect mental states, but we are ourselves the centre of “production” (in the sense of producing a mental state) of space. This establishes the basic position from which we will analyse the representation of landscape in the films. We will adopt the arguments both from Clark and Wunenberger that the elements represented will reveal the dynamic interaction between the filmmaker’s idea of what constitutes a landscape and his or her response to the external environment itself. The task will be to analyse both their choice of the various elements which constitute the landscapes, and the manner in which these elements are treated.
Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout* is a film which has maintained an enduring critical presence. Although it is the earliest released film in this study (1970), it will have also had, paradoxically, the latest release. After twenty-eight years, it was re-released both in Australia and in France in 1998. Part of the reason for the film’s success is its haunting use of landscape.

*Walkabout* compares the attitude of white settlers and traditional Aborigines to the Australian environment. It does this by constructing a narrative employing only three principal characters, a white boy, a white girl, and a black boy. None of these is given a name. The effect of this is to endow the characters with a strong metonymic role. Without names they seem less to be specific individuals, and more to be representatives of their cultures and ideologies. Added to this is the suggestion voiced two or three times by the white girl that she and her brother are the only white people that the black boy has seen. Symbolically, this transforms the story into an allegory of the original meeting of white and black people on the Australian continent. The whole film consequently becomes a symbolic history of European settlement.

Yet from the interview that Nicholas Roeg gave to Richard Combs, his initial intentions with *Walkabout* appear quite vague. Roeg was interested in certain themes in the James Vance Marshall story, *The Children*, (1959), on which he based the film:

> But it wasn’t so much the book; I just liked the idea of people lost somewhere. It’s very easy for a child to be lost, emotionally or physically. And I liked the idea of a great landscape, like the Australian outback, which had hardly been surveyed, and would be like a backcloth, a big, empty backcloth but visually very beautiful.

An early observation that can be made about the representation of the landscape in *Walkabout* is that it emphasises the contrast between the specificity of the urban location and the generality of the non-urban ones. *Walkabout* begins and ends in Sydney, and ensures that the viewer knows this by highlighting the Sydney Harbour Bridge in one sustained shot. Conversely, outside of Sydney in the unsettled areas, the
viewer is given no clues whatsoever as to the locations. This is perhaps intended in order to extend a universal quality to them. A desert becomes all the deserts. A swamp becomes all the swamps. An abandoned homestead stands in for all abandoned homesteads.

The first thirty-six minutes of the film, until the turning point when the black boy arrives, portray the white settlers’ attitude to the land through the characters of the white children. It does this by firstly showing fragments of their urban Sydney life, and then transplanting them to the outback, where the same attitude prevails without change. In Sydney, we see the two white children at school and at home, and their father at work. The white girl is in a classroom of girls practising the pronunciation of English vowels. The father is examining paperwork. There are also general shots which reinforce the general Western cultural attitude behind the characters. For example, a panoramic shot of the botanical gardens emphasises the labelling of the trees and shrubs in Latin. Although brief, this shot nevertheless embodies the whole Western scientific and metaphysical tradition established during the Enlightenment: the plants have been discovered, collected, classified and domesticated.

The film’s introductory segment is a montage set entirely in Sydney. The characters are introduced but there is almost no dialogue between them. A fast-paced didgeridoo dominates the soundtrack. The film also alerts the viewer that it will be representing the environment with a particular aesthetic approach. It opens on a close-up of a red brick wall. This wall at first appears to be attached to a specific building, as would be expected, as the camera pans right and reveals a street in densely urban Sydney. After a sequence of urban scenes, the camera returns us to the wall. The shot pans right, as before, but this time the edge of the wall reveals an outback desert location, thus disturbing the viewer’s expectations. The wall is no longer an ordinary wall. It assumes a symbolic status, signifying not merely the simple division of a
building from its surroundings, but the division between white settlement and the Australian landscape.

The film returns to Sydney with a montage, both of the white family and of Sydney. This procedure of alternating between the family and the city in general is part of the process of endowing them with their metonymic status. The wall reappears a third time, and the camera pans right and we see the same outback desert scene. This time, we are faced with another dilemma. The white family (father, boy, girl, but not the mother) are now here, parked in a car. There is no explanation as to why they are suddenly in this radically different environment, but we can guess that the father is a geologist from the documents in his possession. He scrutinises a book on structural geology, crossing off minerals on a list and examining a survey map. This is the profession which most directly encapsulates the white belief that the earth is there to be exploited. But why are the boy and the girl still dressed in school uniform? Travelling from eastern Sydney to outback New South Wales would require at least six hours - not the sort of journey one makes after school. The only explanation must be that the clothing is symbolic. The filmmaker seems to be highlighting the need for white Australians to learn more about the Australian environment.

Up to this point the viewer has understood that this film is unconventional on several planes, and is also openly symbolic. There has been no dialogue until the white family has left its home environment. This has the effect of highlighting their insular, urban lifestyle, imported from Great Britain. Added to this, scenes are not represented in a purely linear fashion. The inserted initial scene of the outback desert serves as a narratological flash-forward, thus challenging the conventional representation of time as an unbroken flux. The instantaneous leap in space from city to desert in the wall scene not only disrupts our expectations about the passage of time, but also the continuity of space. Additionally, since the viewer is given little verbal information, he
or she must focus less on the narrative, and more on what is being shown. The filmmaker is preparing his viewer to view his subject matter, the Australian landscape, from a different perspective.

The main body of *Walkabout* continues the style established in the introductory segment. One can identify four separate narrative layers which are shown in alternation. The first concerns the activity of the characters as they wander through landscapes that gradually transform from dry and barren to wet and fertile. On a second level, isolated montages of landscape are inserted at regular intervals; those are often composed of shots which show different perspectives of the same object being superimposed from one shot to the next. Thirdly, there are flashbacks inserted regularly, and not always with an apparent link to the progress of the characters. Fourthly, there are scenes of action happening simultaneously elsewhere to other unrelated characters, for example, the scene of the meteorologists. In an interview in 1998 with Richard Combs, Nicholas Roeg explains his choice of style for *Walkabout*:

[Richard Combs] *Did you always have that kind of structure, with the elaborate intercutting, in mind?*

No, that’s the journey. I like shooting a lot of stuff. After all, we’re taking in a lot of information all the time. And I like to be able to get that in the film. You can move it all around, first of all because you have a moveable audience. It’s why a film has nothing to do with literature or theatre. I like shooting a lot of stuff because when you see the scene cut together, you might think, ‘What is going on in their heads? What’s happening here?’

Complementing this already complex synchronous narrative structure is yet another layer, the soundtrack. This is a selection of various musical pieces composed by Stockhausen. The rich flowing electronic and choral melodies played specifically during the landscape montages convey a spiritual dimension to the visual imagery. Other melodies are more playful and are used in the sequences depicting the characters. Lastly, there is the single didgeridoo piece which accompanies the film's introductory sequence, and again when the Aboriginal boy prepares his death dance.

Further to this musical dimension, there is a striking use of the radio which the girl retrieves. It is often turned on, and tuned in to what one would assume is the
School of the Air. These are the programs disseminated to isolated school children to provide them with a formal Western education. The lessons the children hear are devoted to arithmetic, deportment or geology. As the children continue their journey, their education system reveals its irrelevance. They have no idea how to find water or food and only do so by luck. Through the ironic use of the radio, Roeg draws attention to the fact that the European education system has no application to survival in the natural Australian environment.

From this general outline, we can see that the landscape is presented in two contexts, firstly as an entity in its own right and secondly, together with the characters. But this duality of context is not in fact so distinct. In the montage sequences we may see the characters, but they seem unimportant. It is the landscape and not the characters that is being highlighted. There are also other factors at play, in particular the inserts showing simultaneous action elsewhere, or past action in the same area. We can shed light on these factors by analysing four connected sequences during the introductory part of the film, focussing on the sequences which are composed of montages of the landscape. Leading up to the first sequence under analysis is the scene in which the father tries to kill the children, and failing, sets light to the Volkswagen and shoots himself. The girl runs to where she had arranged the picnic lunch and grabs a bottle of lemonade and the radio, and returns to her brother. This is where the first sequence begins which concentrates on the landscape. Its change of perspective is announced most obviously by the choral score which is curiously elegiac, given the tragic circumstances in which the children find themselves. This music accompanies the six shots of the sequence. The first shot shows the children wandering far off across the flat plain dotted with stunted bushes towards the far-distant blue hills. This is followed by a number of close-up shots of the abandoned picnic lunch. Ants are shown swarming over firstly a grapefruit, then a watermelon. Next is a low close-up of the girl's feet as
she is walking. This is followed by a close-up of a lizard rearing up and opening its mouth fiercely. The next shot is a panoramic shot of the distant hills which pulls back rapidly to show the enormous expanse of the uninhabited, or rather, unsettled, plain. The final shot pulls in rapidly to finish as a very close shot of a grasshopper.

This sequence introduces the Australian interior to the viewer. Already, it is suggesting its power by the shots highlighting its size. The shots showing the small life forms indicate that the land is teeming with animal life. The shot of the ferocious lizard hints at hostility towards any intrusion. The music must also be considered. The harmony of the voices as they form chords which flow from one note to the next invokes the harmony of this environment. It is the style of music associated in Western cultures with religious ceremonies, thereby drawing attention to the spiritual dimension of the film.

The following sequence returns to the action of the children, who have obviously reached the hills. It is dusk and they are going to spend the night in a gorge. The radio is playing music. As they lie down on some flat rocks, a close-up shot of an emptied food tin shows a lizard scuttling out.

The soundtrack changes to choral voices. The sleeping children's heads are superimposed over a panoramic shot of the gorge. This is followed by another shot of the gorge, and then finally, a shot of the huge rising sun over a flat horizon. This shot lasts several seconds, and then the sun fades quickly. The superimposed images have the effect of continuing to expand the film’s psychological and spiritual dimensions.

Highly stylised shots of the sun in fact are subsequently seen to be one of the recurrent images of the film. In most of these it is shown rising. The sun is the source of almost all natural light and the symbol of life itself, but it is an ambivalent symbol, because its power can also cause harm. The filmmaker is drawing attention to its abundant presence in the Australian environment, reminding the viewer of why this
country is so dry, and in fact dangerous to those who do not know how to find shade or water. But why the frequency of the dawns? Are they signalling a new era for black-white relations on the Australian continent?

There are also many shots of lizards sprinkled throughout this film. Given that the filmmaker was only ever a visitor to Australia, why did he not choose to have frequent images of Australia's more famous fauna, kangaroos and koalas, for example? There are kangaroos in this film, but there is not one single koala. There is one brief shot each of a wombat and a sulphur-crested cockatoo. But there are perhaps a dozen shots of the lizards. Is this perhaps because lizards are prehistoric, and could be read as a symbol of permanence? The lizards are certainly an indicator of the immense age of the Australian land, and hence of its timelessness. Mammals are relatively recent, and their species evolve rapidly. Transforming a mammal of whatever kind into a motif in such a way would have implied instead that the land is much newer. This is one of the myths of European Australians, and Nicholas Roeg seems to be challenging it. To see how Roeg does this let us examine closely the three sequences following the meeting between the white children and the black boy, who arrived without warning and showed them how to suck water from the bottom of the dried pond.

The sequence begins as night falls. The camera shows first some budgerigars on the tree by the waterhole, then an eagle. The light fades, and then the next day breaks, still with the same eagle. A wide-angle perspective shows the three children walking. The eagle up in its nest spreads its wings. Then we see the children from the eagle's point of view up in its aerie - the girl looking off-screen, followed by a shot of the virtually naked body of the black boy in front of her. The image alternates between the white boy looking off-screen and a group of camels. Then we see alternating shots of a camel train superimposed over this view with the top camel ridden by a man in nineteenth-century clothing. The camera is catching the sun as the white boy watches.
Four shots alternate between the white girl's glance off-screen and the black boy from behind as he walks. The sequence closes with a panorama of the three children walking across the flat desert, three close-ups of a decomposed camel, and then a further panorama of the desert with no humans in sight.

There are three particularly striking images being evoked in this brief sequence, despite the large number of shots involved. In the first, the girl is attracted by the naked body of the black boy. In the second, we are seeing not just the camels that are there in the film's present, but also some which have already been there, and passing through again in ghost form. By doing this, the film is not just developing this landscape as a spatial concept, but is introducing the notion of temporality. It is reminding the viewer of previous efforts made by whites to affirm their presence. The lone camel rider is obviously one of the white explorers of the nineteenth century, whose camels no doubt are the ancestors of the living ones. But then we are given the three close-ups of decomposed camels. This seems to be drawing the spectator’s attention to the fact that even these symbols of endurance have not survived the Australian climate. Was the camel rider also ill-fated, could he be Burke or Wills, the partners of Australia’s most famous failed expedition? The act of exploration is one of the founding activities of the colonisation process, and is also a sign of the desire underpinning it - to dominate the landscape. However, these images are clearly reminding us that the Australian environment is not easily dominated.

This technique of blending past and present also corresponds to one of the fundamental elements of the Aboriginal view of time and space, which fuses past and present. To refer to Michael Christie:

Interaction is not bound by historic time or quantification. The creating ancestors, totemic beings, and deceased relatives are always present. (...) The spirits of one's dead relatives live on in the environment and their presence is felt whether they are physically present or not.\textsuperscript{18}

It is difficult to do more than speculate as to whether the filmmaker is deliberately trying to invoke the Aboriginal world view. He is certainly not using the flashback
technique, which is simply a filmic manifestation of the Western concept of causality. A flashback is a narrative device employed specifically to explain the cause of a related event later in the film's narrative. There are several flashbacks used in *Walkabout*, but this is the only sequence in which the past outside the limits of the film's diegesis is invoked.

In the “gum tree sequence”, we also see another unusual treatment of time. This sequence begins with the children sitting under some gums. The black boy is working on a spear, and a kangaroo is cooking on the fire. The action now begins to alternate between two separate scenes. In the burnt-out Volkswagen, Aboriginal children are playing and their elders are sitting nearby, laughing. In a tree nearby, the dead father has been propped up awkwardly, his face horrific in its process of decay. In between the shots depicting this, the three main characters climb the gum trees and swing from the branches upside down. On the sound track the laughing from both scenes is intermingled and backed by a wavering discordant melody.

This alternate action taking place in the Volkswagen is obviously simultaneous to the one with the gum trees. Yet, the Aboriginal characters in this scene do not interact with the main ones, the only link is their common contact with the car, and the fact that they are all at play, laughing. What is this technique conveying then? Most obviously, it reminds us of the starting point of the white children's “walkabout”. It also shows us that, despite appearances of being uninhabited, this area was populated. Therefore, the land is not completely hostile to human life. The white children had rejected this area as empty, while it was indeed a home.

Somehow the radio in the derelict car reactivates, despite being burnt out, and scares the tribe, and they leave. The action switches to the scene under the gums where it is now dark. The black is talking in his own language to the girl, who does not understand him, but it is obviously something serious. She says “good night” and he
lies down. A close-up shows him watching her, as she is rubbing her inner thighs. He says something and she is embarrassed. She says: “I'll be all right in the morning”, and looks up at the branches above. She continues: “I'm just a bit sore from . . .”. Now follows a sequence of five separate shots of different forks in the major limbs, each being superimposed into the following one. These shots are framed so that they resemble the female upper thighs and groin. The camera returns to the girl who now says: “Oh, dear.” The black boy walks over to her, speaks to her again with a serious tone. They look at each other intensely but uncomfortably, and he walks off.

This scene is the key one in the film showing the intersecting relationship between the human characters and their environment. By constructing a montage which sexualises the gum-tree limbs, the filmmaker is drawing attention to the fundamental nature of this relationship. Once again, his approach corresponds more to the Aboriginal ontology than to the European one. In sexualising the landscape, he implies that humans and their environment can be connected, and that they are not separate. Michael Christie shows this perspective in explaining how to interpret an Aboriginal story involving a giant spirit dog:

The children's grandmother, the land they were walking on, and the giant spirit dog were all one. In the Western mind they are differentiated, thus the story is puzzling; we don't quite understand it.19

This scene is a further piece of evidence that, although the filmmaker is using an overtly European aesthetic style in his cinematography and editing, he is using it to offer an alternative way of conceptualising the Australian landscape to a European audience. He seems to be attempting to a significant degree to portray the Aboriginal approach. In fact, although Nicholas Roeg does not mention Aboriginal culture specifically in the interview with Richard Combs, he does strongly oppose the way in which Westerners view their kind of culture:

There’s a negative connotation when people talk about primitive attitudes, which I can’t accept. Sophisticated civilisation may be more comfortable, and consumer things nice to have, but I don’t think it’s better. I was shooting in Morocco last year [1997], and one of the crew was disparaging about how people lived. I said, ‘Well, what haven’t they got?’ All he could think of
was television. They had the wind and the sea and the stars and the children were happy. Dates fell off the palms. What haven’t they got? A water mattress or something.\textsuperscript{20}

After this sequence, there is a montage of spectacular shots of giant, golden, burning setting suns, and then the remainder of the film takes place in quite different landscapes. These all have the common element that water is no longer scarce. The children cross swamps to densely-wooded hills, and end up eventually in a tropical setting with a deserted homestead. The transformation from the dry lands of the early part of the film to the fertile lands of the latter part mirrors the increasing sexual tension which develops between the girl and the black boy. It also indicates the diversity of the vast Australian landscape, and its capacity to be forgiving as well as harsh. At one point, we see the girl swimming naked in a secluded natural pool in a gorge. She seems to have overcome her adversity to this untamed environment, and finds contentment in immersing herself in it.

In the final scene of the film, we see how it has affected her. She is now living in Sydney, in the same apartment as she did with her parents. Her husband returns from work and begins to tell her about the latest turn in his office's politics. Bored, she turns her head and looks away. The film returns to the pool in the gorge. This time, there is a scene we did not see. We do not know if she is remembering or imagining, or even if the two are confused. The three children are naked and happy on an islet in the middle.

The film closes on this scene with an unseen narrator reciting a verse of poem:

\begin{quote}
Into my heart an air that kills,
From yon far country blows.
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?
This is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain.
The happy highways where I went,
And cannot come again.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

This poem with its obviously English perspective on landscape is read as the camera reveals the white brother and sister's school uniforms hung up neatly on two poles at the side of the pool, imitating store mannequins. The film has not just presented a series of
hugely varying images in order to represent the Australian landscape metonymically, but has additionally invited - or even seduced - the viewer, with the striking and memorable imagery, to rethink her or his notion of the Australian landscape. Roeg reveals the variety of ways that the Australian landscape can be interpreted by the different filming and editing techniques he employs. The final scene is not a flashback, as we did not see it take place. It seems to be rather a wistful fantasy, and suggests that the girl has completely misunderstood her experience of Australian nature untouched by Europeans, although she senses that it gave her more satisfaction than her urban life. The mock mannequins and the poem, with its completely English perspective of landscape, highlight the irony of new settlers of Australia only seeing what they want to see. In the end, Roeg removes the school uniforms from his two white characters, because they show that they are not capable of learning.

**Picnic at Hanging Rock**

Like *Walkabout*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* borrows its basic storyline from a relatively unknown novel, but transforms it into an inspired piece of art rather than offering a mere screen adaptation. Similarly, it is distinguished by a highly stylised cinematography and editing, complemented by a striking soundtrack, in this case, almost exclusively played by a pan flute with an electronic organ. Drawing attention not only to its subject matter, but also to its presentation, indicates that the filmmakers of both films are not aiming at affecting the audience's perception of the Australian landscape, but rather their relationship to it. In highlighting the individuality of their own perspective, the films provoke the spectator to infer by extension that her or his own image of the landscape must also be particular. If they can understand this mental image is relative rather than absolute, they will be more likely to adapt or rethink it. This possibility is further suggested by the fact that the two films are also linked by
having students in uniform as the main characters. The school uniform implies that an education is in process, and so the viewer identifying with such a character is correspondingly ready to learn.

Unlike *Walkabout*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* concentrates on one particular piece of land which symbolises the entire Australian environment. This is the “Hanging Rock” of the title, which is really a hill, not a single rock, covered in large boulders. The hill is not very high, five hundred feet (150m), but it rises steeply from the flat surrounding plain. Among the boulders are caves and dark recesses. At its base are a creek and many large river gums. The second of the Australian films in which landscape is the primary theme has had such an impact that it has entered the mythology of white Australia. Its story takes place in 1900, the last year that Australia was officially a colony. Although the only Aboriginal presence is the momentary cameo role of a bush tracker, it offers a very strong and powerful challenge to the way in which white Australians perceive the Australian landscape.

*Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a film in which a particular part of the Australian landscape is almost overtly a psychological manifestation rather than a physical one. Echoing Kenneth Clark’s argument that nature is an idea rather than a reality, the rock in the film is treated as much as an idea than as a geological reality - in fact it is represented more as an entity with a magnetic effect on certain people. The rock is introduced before the credits roll with a long shot which remains fixed. At first all we see are the trees clustered around its base while the top is shrouded in mist. As the credits roll, the mist lifts, revealing its formation as a cluster of rocks half hidden among more trees growing on its slopes. There is no music, only a low continuous, unidentifiable growl. Then the scene cuts to an establishing shot of Mrs Appleyard's College for Girls, an austere Victorian manor, set in an English garden. One of the girls is lying on her bed, looking up, at the ceiling presumably, reciting verse: “What we see,
and what we've seen, is but a dream . . . a dream within a dream.” This speech positions the story firmly in the realm of psychological experience, and perhaps would explain in part why, even though it never resolves the mystery in its narrative, it leaves the spectator satisfied.

The first few sequences in the film take place in the College, situated around three hours by horse from the Rock, and then during the carriage journey to it. During this part, the Rock is discussed twice, having the effect of giving the viewer a preconception of it. Mrs Appleyard warns them as they are about to leave:

Once again let me remind you that the Rock itself is extremely dangerous and you are therefore forbidden to engage in any tomboy foolishness in the matter of exploration, even on the lower slopes. (…) It is, however, a geological marvel on which you will be required to write a brief essay on Monday morning.

The students are being advised to observe the Rock, but not to experience it. The principal's description “extremely dangerous” echoes the ominous image and sound presented during the opening credits. At the same time, the term “geological marvel” is interesting. It both directs attention to the scientific discipline invented by the Europeans for the objective study of land yet also constitutes an emotive response to it.

One of the teachers assigned to supervise the girls is the mathematics teacher, Greta McCraw. As the carriage comes within sight of Hanging Rock, she extends Mrs Appleyard's brief mention of geology into a geological description of the rock, to the amusement of Irma, one of the senior girls:

Only a million years old! The rocks around Mount Macedon must be 350 million years old. Siliceous lava, forced up from deep down below. Soda trachytes, extruded in a highly viscous state, building the steep-sided megolyths we see in Hanging Rock. And quite young, geologically speaking, just a million years.

Irma's response to this is: “Waiting a million years, just for us!” The shot that follows is a brief repeat of the one which began the film, the long shot of Hanging Rock, accompanied by the low, indistinct growling.

This is how the viewer is prepared for the Rock before any of the scenes taking place on it, or in it, are shown. The image thus far is quite ambiguous and incohesive,
composed of a curious contrast of scientific description from the dialogue, and the 
repeated long shots accompanied by the unsettling rumbling sound. Miss McGraw's 
perspective of the rock echoes the rationalist Cartesian-inspired tradition mentioned by 
Wunenberger. Irma's anthropocentric comment implies that she endows the rock with 
its own subjectivity - to wait is a conscious human activity. In doing this, she 
demonstrates an attitude to landscape that is completely opposed to the conventional 
view. Miss McGraw sees the rock as something to study and analyse. Irma sees the 
Rock as something with which to establish a relationship.

The landscape of the Rock is presented in considerable detail during an 
extended sequence of 14 minutes. At the picnic ground, Miranda convinces the French 
instructor, Mademoiselle de Poitiers, to allow her and the other two senior girls to 
ascend the Rock to study its form. A younger girl, Edith, accompanies them. The 
scene at the foot of the Rock is already interesting for the contrast it makes between the 
teachers and the students, and their environment. They are dressed in the cumbersome 
full-length dresses fashionable in Europe at the time. These outfits were designed to be 
worn indoors, and probably for short periods. There is considerable irony in their being 
worn in the Australian bush. The outfits are entirely inappropriate to the environment, 
and as they function in the film as icons of colonial civilisation, by extension, they 
suggest that this is inappropriate as well.

The character of Miranda provides further evidence that this film portrays the 
Australian landscape as something closer to Wunenberger's argument, that is, a 
primarily psychological construction resulting from the dynamic interaction between 
the human perceiver and the natural elements, rather than the illusion that it is made up 
of natural elements alone. This is most clearly signalled when Miranda jumps over the 
creek. The shot is in slow motion, immediately telling us that something else is 
happening apart from a mere physical action. It seems to represent Miranda's entrance
into another dimension, which the viewer is not privileged to see. One of the girls calls her name, but it sounds very far away. Miranda simply smiles at the grass and the trees of which she appears more a part rather than just an intruder.

The next shot is characteristic of those which follow. First, we are presented with an area of trees and grass which we have not seen before, and then the camera pans across to reveal the girls making their way up the slopes. In this way, the spectator more directly shares the experience of the girls as they continually enter new territory. Complementary shots show the rocks above and then show the girls each looking up in turn. In this way, we gradually build up an image of the site. It is covered in grass and flourishing trees, and cluttered with vertical-sided columnar boulders.

But it is not just the visual image itself which is informing our total image of the Rock. The music, the framing and the editing influence it significantly. As the girls begin the climb up the heights, they are accompanied by melodies played by piano or the pan flute in combination with the organ. As they approach the top, this effect which evokes an ascent into heaven is counterpointed with increasingly more frequent repetitions of the ominous, indeterminate growling we heard at the start of the film. We are being pushed simultaneously towards two opposite ends of a spectrum. This wild, unknown bushland - to Europeans - offers both joy and fulfilment, yet is also a threat in some way.

In a key segment, Miranda and Irma are unambiguously ecstatic. Their actions are in slow motion. Alternatively we see Miranda slowly turning and gazing up at the summit as the summit is superimposed in a panning shot going in the other direction, and Irma dancing in circles. But other shots either side of this segment are carried by the growling sound and filmed from noticeably odd angles. For example, in one shot the camera is positioned from within one of the narrow alleys formed by the collection of boulders and “extrusions”. Miranda appears and peers past the camera in slow
motion, and then continues out of view. In another shot, we watch the girls file along a narrow passage from the top of these rocks. Both of these shots are conventions used by horror films to suggest that an evil presence is watching, awaiting its chance. In a way, this echoes Irma's premonition that the rock has a consciousness of its own (“Waiting a million years, just for us!”).

The girls reach a clearing near the top and they suddenly all lie down and fall asleep. The camera shows them sleeping and then pans up to show the top of Hanging Rock. The next shot shows some bare feet, then pans to a lizard, an arm, and to Miranda's face. We then see the girls at the foot of Hanging Rock, also sleeping. The camera pans to the Rock's peak, much further away from the foot. One of the party is, however, awake. It is Miss McGraw. She is studying an isosceles triangle in a geometry book. She looks up, in slow motion. Again an indication that something else is happening apart from what we merely see. It is only later that we discover that Miss McGraw also disappears. The shot which relocates the action back to the top, frames the sleeping girls from above: in other words, from the peak itself. In the final shots for this sequence, the girls awaken, and Edith complains that she feels awful. Miranda, Irma and Marion do not hear her, they appear to be in a trance. In slow motion, they file through a narrow passage between two boulders and disappear. Edith screams and runs off.

During the remainder of the film, only Irma is found. Miranda, Marion and Miss McGraw disappear definitively, and without explanation. As a result of this absence of resolution, the dominating feature of the landscape in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* becomes not so much some aspect of its physical features, but the quality of its mystery. How can we interpret this anomalous representation?

In his article on landscape, Wunenberger also discusses the predominance of islands and deserts in the collective imagination of myths and literature. These two
entities, he believes, are linked to the fundamental need of the human unconscious to appropriate space. The island is popular because it is easy to imagine: its borders are distinct. It also represents security, safety from outsiders. The desert represents the void, ready to be crossed and conquered. But it is his discussion of the archetype of the island which can come to our aid in uncovering the mystery of Hanging Rock. For the Rock is nothing more than a land-bound island, if one reflects on its basic constitution. It rises abruptly from the floor of the surrounding plain, its bleak rocks as much a contrast with the surrounding flat, grassy plains as land with sea. It is separated from civilisation by a three-hour journey in a carriage. It possesses its own micro-climate, and its many large trees demonstrate that it is lush and fertile.

But there is another side to islands. Within the same structures which give it security and safety are found repression and the need to escape. Wunenberger contrasts the idyllic islands of the Greek Gods to the suffocating entity described by Thomas More in *Utopia*. He concludes:

> The utopian island thus imperceptibly expresses through its landscape the totality of the intellectual, moral and social values that are part of its organisation: uniformity of ways of living, omnipresence of the law, totalitarian distribution of rights and duties, etc. The insular topography is host thus in its forms to a world turned back to front, a paradise upside-down.25

The island then is an ambivalent entity. This corresponds to the ambivalent image of the Rock portrayed by Peter Weir. It seems to be a paradise for some, like Miranda, and a hell for others, such as Edith. But those who are seduced by its charms are never seen again. It is a cunning predator, which lures its victims with charm and swallows them up. Robin Wright finds the same ambivalent characteristics in his assessment of the Rock's role:

> The Rock becomes a metaphor for the whole Australian bush; powerful, dangerous, desirable, beautiful, mystical, pure and most importantly incomprehensible to those living by the repressive rules of British colonial society.

But it is not clear if Peter Weir is necessarily warning his white public to be wary of the Australian bush. Weir indicates his desire to explore the metaphysical aspects of the Australian landscape in an interview with Brian McFarlane:
For me the grand theme was nature, and even the girls' sexuality was as much a part of that as the lizard crawling across the top of the rock. They were part of the larger question. It appears from this statement that Weir perceived the girls, as much a part of “Nature” as animals and their surroundings. Through a particular environment, the Rock, he wanted to explore the very meaning of the concept of nature. This is signalled by the music, the slow-motion shots, Miranda's ecstatic glances, and in particular, the shots of the four girls climbing the Rock taken from unusual points of view. All of these contribute to producing the mystical element and the incomprehensibility remarked on by Robin Wright above. Later in the film, we are prepared for the fact that the film will not provide a solution by a brief conversation between two minor characters in a glasshouse. The gardener tells Tom, who cannot understand how the girls could have disappeared without trace: “Some questions have answers, some don't.”

Nonetheless, there is a considerable theme of loss that underscores Picnic at Hanging Rock. If we are to accept that the Rock is the symbol for the Bush, the Australian interior in general, and that it is unknowable within Western terms of metaphysical reference, can we determine the role of the loss of two students and one teacher? What is the effect of their loss within the film? There are two characters who refuse to accept that the girls could just lose themselves in the landscape. The first one is Michael Fitzhubert. He is a young English aristocrat who is staying with his uncle and aunt at their large country property somewhere between the College and the Rock. He watched Miranda cross the creek and fell in love with her. When he learns that she did not return, and that the Police, bloodhounds and an Aboriginal tracker could not find her or the others, he goes up the Rock himself. He finds Irma, unconscious, but alive. But he too finds no trace of Miranda, Marion, or Miss McGraw. So his triumph is only partial. The second one is Mrs Appleyard. She blames the rock for the ruin of her College, as the wealthy parents withdraw their children. She is found dead at the foot of the Rock, apparently after having climbed it to the very peak and jumped off.
Both these characters are highly representative of the British colonialist spirit. Michael embodies its ruling class, and Mrs Appleyard educates its offspring in order to perpetuate its values. Because they insist on understanding the Australian environment according to principles developed in the English one, they are not only unable to decode its mysteries, but unable also to accept the fact that there are mysteries, “questions without answers”. In the England driven by Enlightenment rationalism, questions do have answers. Hanging Rock does not, as college girls can disappear into it without explanation. The disappearances seem to be the obvious indicator in the film that, although Anglo-European culture imposes itself on the surface of the Australian land, its influence goes no further. Having to confront the realisation that they ultimately cannot have the same power over this land as in England is too much for these two characters. Michael Fitzhubert moves to Queensland, and Mrs Appleyard commits suicide.

The landscape in Picnic at Hanging Rock is an ambivalent entity. The enormous success of the film must be at least in part due to the portrayal of the landscape as corresponding to the image held by the Australian public. It is beautiful yet dangerous, maternal yet indifferent, but always exotic and therefore always other, foreign, alien. Unlike in Walkabout, there is no attempt to introduce elements of the Aboriginal conceptualisation of the land, because in Picnic at Hanging Rock, the only Aboriginal presence is the non-speaking role of the black tracker. What happens instead is that Peter Weir invests a piece of land in mid-northern Victoria with a mythical presence. Suddenly a cluster of boulders crowned by a monolith means something to postcolonial Australians. What has happened in this film is that a link has been formed between the imported culture and its new territory. In being set in the past, the film knits the myth also into the past, giving its spectators the impression that it existed long before it was invented. Thus the colonising culture creates its own
heritage, and its members can feel more at ease in a territory that has hitherto been absent in their imported mythologies.

Given that the Rock also plays such a significant metonymic role, it shows the potential for investing the rest of the Australian landscape with new, imported meaning. This must be the final step in the colonial conquest. To invest the acquired lands with a new identity, fixed within the terms of reference of its new proprietor. This is perhaps the real reason behind the extraordinary reception of Picnic at Hanging Rock with the “Euro-Australian” public. Its collective cultural identity craves a link with the place it inhabits, and the myth-building film satiates it. If we briefly recall the two other Australian-made commercial successes, The Man from Snowy River and Crocodile Dundee, we can see that at least part of their success must be attributable to such mythological elements.

**Chocolat**

We turn now to four French films in which landscape plays a prominent role, although not with the exceptional degree of stylisation seen in Walkabout and Picnic at Hanging Rock. The first two French films we examine have attracted the interest of film scholars, as did the two Australian films. We have looked at these elements that contribute to the construction of landscape in two Australian films in which landscape not only forms the most notable characteristic of the film, but even assumes the role of a human character. Narratively, these characterised landscapes act as antagonists, motivating the human characters' actions, and cinematographically, they present powerful and memorable images. In French cinema, there are no films on colonial themes which appear to represent landscapes in such a strikingly predominant fashion, that is, where the central focus of the film is the landscape itself and the story is entirely
subjected to its representation. But in all the films, even *L'Amant*, landscape has a strong presence.

*Chocolat* is a film in which the land is very much a primary concern of the colonial Dalens family. They are living in North Cameroon in the French West Africa of the 1950s, where Marc Dalens is the regional governor. His job is to maintain France's presence, and the principal diegetic evidence of this is his undertaking of a ten-day expedition across the territory under his administration. This means his wife, Aimée, is left in the homestead with her daughter, France, and the black servants. A large part of the film alternates between the expedition and the homestead. This creates two complementary perspectives of the landscape. Firstly, there is that of Marc, who sees the land as something to explore and control, and secondly, there is that of Aimée, who sees it rather as something to fear. While he is out checking on the natives, she spends much of her time in the house frightened.

The body of the film is a sustained 86 minute flashback of the childhood of Marc’s and Aimée's daughter, France. The film begins and ends in the 1980s with France as an adult returning from the country of France to revisit her colonial childhood home. The name of the main character and her gender, are clear signs that she is meant to be identified with France, and that her story proposes to be a metaphor for the representation of that nation and its colonial past. The principal theme is the relationship between the Africans and the French, which is reflected in the relationship between the Europeans and the African landscape.

These are both established in the opening shot of the film, which continues without a cut during the credits. At first it shows a deserted beach against a clear blue sky. The screen is divided in two by the horizon line. The soundtrack is only the waves crashing. Two human figures, which were undetectable at first, emerge from the water. As they get closer, we see they are a black boy and a black man. They are in a
playful mood. They move off-screen to the left, and simultaneously, the camera pans slowly right, gradually swapping the waves for the trees lining the top of the sand. It stops on a white girl who has been watching the swimmers, like the spectator. The second shot is a close-up of her facial expression as she watches, neutral and pensive. The black boy's head in the water; then his hand; then a big black hand - his father's; a two-shot of father and son lying in the water. Back to the girl who is looking uncomfortable. Another shot of the sea and then to the girl, who is rubbing the sand from her toes, before getting up and walking off.

This sequence is quite long: several minutes. Because there is a minimum of human action taking place, the viewer is being compelled to focus on the landscape. The primary characteristic of the beach is that it is natural: there is no sign of direct human intervention. Yet we do notice quite clearly that there is a difference between the blacks' attitude towards this environment and the white girl's. They are immersing themselves in it in an almost ecstatic union, swimming, or lying down on the sand and letting the waves run over them. She, in contrast, is not comfortable. Her reaction is to brush away the sand and leave. She seems to find this environment uninviting. Yet France, the girl in this sequence, does know the man and son, briefly at least. She travels with them on her way to revisit her childhood home. She was born in this country, yet now she has returned she does not know how to relate to it.

We first see the landscape of her colonial childhood in an extended travelling shot taken from a moving car. The lightly undulating plains of yellow grass whizz by, interrupted now and then by a cluster of grass huts of the same colour. France, as a little girl, is in a light truck with her parents Marc and Aimée, and the houseboy, Protée. The truck has stopped while they eat and Marc and Protée relieve themselves at the side of the road. Marc remarks that he will widen the road the following year. This comment is difficult to place in context. Perhaps in widening the road, as Governor, he
hopes to increase the local awareness of the colonial presence. There does not seem to be any other traffic.

They are returning to the homestead, and it is on this journey that we first see the rock described by E. Ann Kaplan as “phallus-shaped”. This rock is certainly a motif of the film, and shots throughout the film taken from the front of the homestead show it dominating the background. We have already mentioned, earlier in the chapter, the ideological interpretation to which Kaplan subjects the rock, and, in fact, she pursues this line of reasoning even further. She suggests that in the 1950s, France’s control of her colony was “flagging”:

This is subtly suggested in Marc Dalens’ abstraction, indeed feminisation (in one shot, he is seen stopping to draw the phallic rock, as if aware that France has lost its virility, aware of the need to gain the phallus. Meanwhile the natives wait patiently, also patiently waiting for their time to be free). 28

Although Kaplan errs in her belief that Marc Dalens is drawing the same rock, he is, however, contemplating a spectacular landscape covered by many such rocks as the one dominating the homestead. The shots are not filmed to construct the rock as overtly phallic. One only has to remember the gum-tree limbs in Walkabout. The joins in gum tree limbs have a passing similarity to the female groin, but the manner in which Nicholas Roeg both films and edits them highlights this similarity. However, the sheer number of rocks and their resemblance to the one near the homestead, together with Marc Dalens’ expression of anxiety, add support to Kaplan’s assertion that the white man is not in control of this territory. The fact that no one ever climbs the rock near the homestead, and the endless vista of them in the later scene of Marc with his sketchbook, transforms them into a subtle but sure barrier to this control.

There is also a second hill which dominates the homestead from another perspective. In shots showing the outside shower, we see a round hill in the background. A psychoanalytical analysis may read this as a symbolic breast. The presence of this maternal symbol adds a nurturing aspect to the landscape, and this is so
for France, the daughter, who climbs this second hill. But the character of Aimée suggests that she, at least, does not feel this way. She spends her time indoors if she is not accompanied by her husband or her servant Protée. She is more sensitive to what is symbolised by the phallic hill - the uncontrollability of Africa - shown in her terror of night-time predators like hyenas. The combination of these two dominant elements of the landscape in Chocolat produces, as a result, an ambivalent image. On the one hand, France can be seen as comfortable and spoilt still - embodied by the child France – while in the background the phallic rocks signal a challenge to this comfort.

Hills in archetypal terms, like their larger counterparts, mountains, universally symbolise spirituality. As geological phenomena, they are very old in relation to human concepts of time, and therefore also symbolise permanence. In Chocolat, the hills surrounding the homestead also may be a way for the film both to point to the spiritual qualities of Africa and contrast the comparatively ephemeral colonial period to the duration of its previous cultures. Recognition of these spiritual qualities may well have been behind the duration of these colonised cultures.

The landscape in Chocolat is prominent but by no means the dominating concern of the film as it is in Walkabout and Picnic at Hanging Rock. In no scene or sequence does the filmmaker draw attention to it in either unusual shots or editing techniques. The European spectator to whom this film is aimed can acknowledge the splendour of the countryside and its huge sense of abundant space. But this film in no way attempts to understand it, as does Walkabout, or mythologise it, as does Picnic at Hanging Rock. In Chocolat, the white characters do not seem to develop any sort of relationship to their landscape. Rather, they seem to be aware that their culture seems to sit on the African land uneasily without any promise of permanency, not unlike the manner perhaps in which oil sits on water. Marc Dalen's act of drawing the little rock may well have been his attempt to gain access to a better relationship with the land.
This film is based loosely on the life of its director, Claire Denis, and in an interview with Sebastien Lifshitz she makes comments that demonstrate her attitude about European settlers and their relationship with the African land. She claims that even as a very young girl, she had the feeling that her family were usurpers. She refused to allow herself to love the land because of this: “If I love it, I appropriate it, and I didn’t have the right to appropriate it.” 29 She disagrees completely with the way in which the Danish colonial novelist, Karen Blixen, describes her love for her farm in La Ferme africaine:

While reading this book, I was choking with rage! It’s outrageous, this love for the land, it didn’t belong to her. 30

In the same way, her white characters seem reluctant to dare to love the land, and as a result, it stays distant, and by the end of the film they - France, Aimé and Marc - have left Africa. Chocolat shows the splendour of the African land in North Cameroon but it never permits its viewers to become sentimental. They are invited to appreciate the landscape but not to desire it.

Indochine

The plantation is the central of four major locations in Indochine, the other three being the verandah of a deluxe hotel in Saigon, Dragon Island and an enclosed valley. Eliane specifies at the start of the film that she adopted the orphaned daughter of an Annamite prince and, in so doing, inherited the prince’s lands. This had the consequence of increasing the extent of the plantation she owned with her father into one of the biggest in Indochina - 600 hectares.

The plantation is a model replica of the colony. It is owned and controlled by two white people who inhabit a huge luxurious mansion with many servants, all Indochinese. Of the property, all is ordered and controlled. The rubber trees grow in vast rows and columns, and the processing is done in a huge shed full of heavy
machinery. The Indochinese workers live in shanty villages in direct contrast to the great Devries villa. The overall image is one in which everything and everyone knows its place and, as a result, everything works efficiently.

The opulence is reproduced in the Saigon luxury hotel where Eliane meets her equally influential, if not so rich, French friends, such as Guy, the Inspector of Police, his wife, and an Admiral in the Navy. Where Eliane represents the land-owning class, the Inspector and the Admiral are reassuring symbols that the economic and social structure which appears to have so favoured the French will always be maintained.

But we soon see that this rigid structure, while appearing to be so honest and clear, if inegalitarian, is supported by another hidden activity, in which greed manifests itself in its worst form, slave trading. In the early part of the film, we see Eliane beating a worker among the rubber trees for attempting to run away. In other words, neither he nor any of the other workers, is free. No doubt they are paid, but they are, nevertheless, slaves. The slave market is found at Dragon Island, somewhere near the coast. Dragon Island is represented to us in Gothic terms: distant, shrouded in fog, run by a psychologocially disturbed officer. This is where the law and order of the colony is subverted to the whim of traders and exiled navy personnel. Although hidden, it is the evil heart of the colony, supplying the workers to make the plantations profitable and to build cheap railway lines, and therefore to maintain the superficial opulence of colonial life.

This is why the colony, in such apparent harmony at its surface, is destined to collapse. Because it is simply not honest. It hides its true character. The Indochinese are depicted as a hard-working and proud people, and when they revolt it is against their exploitation by the French. Etienne's parents, Camille, Eliane's adopted Annamite princess and a naval officer exiled to Dragon Island, flee to be helped by a highly-organised resistance group based in a secret valley. This pocket of hidden land has
never been subjugated to French power. The valley is the most interesting landscape in
the film. It is enclosed entirely by steep cliffs, its entrance through an underground
river is only known to its initiates, which is why the French have never found it. Inside
is a piece of Indochina which has remained autonomous. Its symbolism as a womb is
powerful. Inside, our attention is drawn to this quality when Camille announces that
she is pregnant. While there, she is taught about Marx and Lenin. When she leaves the
valley, she has been reborn as a Communist. From this point, the entire narrative
changes direction, as Camille motivates the rebels into organised force that reclaims
Vietnam from France.

It is these four locations which provide the backdrop of modern-day Vietnam's
colonial landscape. Although the title, *Indochine*, refers to the former political entity
and not directly to the physical entity supporting it, the landscape seen in these
locations nevertheless remains prominent. Much of the action may happen inside
Eliane's great house, or in other interior settings, but many scenes also take place
outside in the Indochinese landscape. But the filmmaker considers that it is the
interactions between the characters which drive the film, rather than any direct contact
with or response to the land.

**Fort Saganne**

Alain Corneau’s epic depicts the French Empire’s determination to retain
possession of its Saharan lands. The narrative centres around the adult life of
Lieutenant Saganne, played by Gérard Depardieu, and his three journeys into the
Sahara to prevent an Arab tribal leader from reconquering the North Sahara. In
between these journeys, Saganne travels back to France and finally dies in a battle
against the Germans. The film was adapted from a novel by Louis Gardel, and was
criticised by “M. S.” in *Positif* for missing an important spiritual quality of the book:
The sense of metaphysical expectation, in spite of an ever-inspired Depardieu, never breaks the surface in the innumerable confrontations between the solitary hero and the desert. Saganne claims to “simplify” himself out there. The film meanwhile dies of dehydration from it.31

It is true that there is no palpable sense of a purgatorial wait in Fort Saganne. Despite the numerous references during the first two-thirds of the film to the threat of attack from the Arab sultan, Omar, one senses more that the driving theme of the film is Lieutenant Charles Saganne’s initiation into manhood through his confrontation with the desert. At each new advance in the narrative, he is consistently brought to a crisis from thirst or the effects of the sun, which he always survives.

Beyond the desire or need to become a man, Charles Saganne is also very ambitious. The Sagannes are peasants from the Ariège region in France, and Saganne’s ambition to improve his social standing is the subject of the opening scene. Here he is a small boy gazing longingly at a château through the bars of the front gate. A tall man, perhaps a butler, or even the owner, orders him away. In the following scene, captioned “1911”, it is in ruins but he is an officer and has bought it. In a letter back to his brother, Lucien, we see why Lieutenant Saganne elected to spend time in a colony: “Here a man is judged by his acts not by his origins.” The audience understands that his ambition to rise to become a gentleman, as signified by the château, is the driving force which will inspire him to conquer the harshness of the desert.

The desert in Fort Saganne is never filmed in great detail as in Walkabout or in Picnic at Hanging Rock. There are never the close-ups of the items that make up the landscape, such as trees, hillocks, lizards, clouds, and so on. As a result, despite the lengthy duration of its presence on screen, it remains always a vague entity, threatening but never more than a background. A caption during the opening credits tell us where it has been filmed: “in Mauritania, in the historical cities of Chinguetti, Ouadane and their surroundings”. The actual surroundings match the fictional ones. Saganne and his men cross Mauritania from its north-eastern border with Algeria from where they begin, over to the port of Nouakchott, the capital.
The desert is not the only setting in *Fort Saganne* that could be classified as landscape, but it is the only one which is a topic of dialogue. Unlike the family farm, the château park or the battlefield where Charles is finally killed while fighting the Germans, the desert itself can kill. Charles makes the first desert trek in the narrative from Algeria under the command of Colonel Dubreuilh, played by Philippe Noiret. The destination is the fort which will eventually carry Saganne’s name.

During the course of the trek by camel, long shots periodically show the soldiers and Arab guides moving along slowly in a long line. In these shots, as a result of the framing, this line cuts across the screen horizontally, giving the illusion of it either separating or joining the sand below from the sky above. In the background occasionally are hills, but these are never mentioned in the conversation nor climbed. Just as the men are almost exhausted, both Arab and French, Colonel Dubreuilh deliberately accelerates the pace to forty miles a day to punish Saganne for discovering him asleep. This decision of course tests the endurance of all the men, although Saganne suffers like the others, he also revels in the experience. He writes back to his brother: “J’apprends le désert” - literally: “I am learning the desert”. The hero of the film views this adversity as an opportunity to step beyond his peasant background.

When the expedition arrives at the fort, we discover that two of its occupants are insane, the doctor and the Sergeant. No doubt they serve as counterpoints to Saganne as examples of what the desert can do to those unable to adapt to its demanding conditions. The Sergeant has periodic outbursts in which he insults the officer in charge of the fort. The doctor, played by Hippolyte Girardot, amuses himself by playing cello on camels on the ramparts of the fort and eventually shoots himself.

Saganne meets a more dangerously deranged madman in the course of his second journey into the desert, during which he is now in charge. His mission is to bring back an Arab ally and personal friend, Amajar. Colonel Dubreuilh does not want
Amajar to join Sultan Omar, who is plotting to reconquer the desert back from France.

The desert beyond the fort is what Saganne tells Lucien is “the real desert, there are no more landmarks”. His first journey out to the fort under Dubreuilh was hard because of the pace the Colonel set. This second journey is hard, due not to just the harshness of normal desert conditions as before - heat and little water - but to the most extreme of desert conditions - sand storms. The montages are no longer of the line of men making their way across the dunes. This time, we see the camels stumbling and the men falling exhausted. But we know that Saganne is adapting as he is completely clothed like the local Arab tribesmen, therefore appropriately protected from the sun.

It is on the course of this second journey that Saganne meets Captain Baculard and his attendant group of native soldiers. The Captain confronts Saganne and orders him off his territory: an extraordinary way to greet a fellow French officer. But the viewer can guess quickly that Baculard has spent too much time in the desert sun patrolling his little patch of French West Africa. Saganne needs to continue his search for Amajar so he defies Captain Baculard’s warning to turn back. To Saganne’s men he seems to have triumphed but they underestimate the severity of the Captain’s deranged mind. They eventually find Amajar, severely mutilated but the sole survivor of a massacre conducted by Baculard.

After Saganne amputates Amajar’s gangrenous leg, he offers his resignation to Colonel Dubreuilh back in Algiers. Saganne has now seen three examples of what the desert landscape can do to those who stay too long and maintain a lifestyle suited to Europe. But the Colonel convinces him to stay by appealing to Saganne’s more personal need to conquer the desert: to prove he is better than the peasants he descends from. Saganne returns to Mauritania and defeats Sultan Omar definitively.

The landscape in Fort Saganne is never given a direct cinematic treatment in the way we saw in Walkabout, Picnic at Hanging Rock and Chocolat. Rather than portray
the desert’s aspects directly, the film tends to show us what it does to the Europeans who believe it is just as easy to dominate as Europe. It kills them outright or leaves them alive, but mentally disfigured. The film never allows us any insight into the perception of the desert of the Berbers, people who obviously have succeeded in living in the harsh environment over many millennia. As a result, the desert in Fort Saganne comes to symbolise death and insanity, which it surely is to any people who try to rigidly impose their cold-climate culture on its heated horizons. Ultimately, the film is asking us why did France want the desert so much.

**Les Caprices d’un fleuve**

Like Fort Saganne, this film directed by Bernard Giraudeau and released in 1996, the latest date of all the films in our corpus, received mixed reviews. The first sentence in the review in *Positif* states simply: “Strange piece of work.” But the reviewer is not able to elaborate on this statement, only to argue that, despite the splendid landscapes and feeling of human solidarity, one is left feeling unsatisfied:

Is it a question of rhythm in the editing? too much restraint in the organisation of the characters?

The reviewer in *Cahiers du cinéma* echoes this sentiment:

(...) a film that is proper, but something essential is missing.

But many other reviews were positive, even laudatory. If there is an identifiable problem with this film, it is probably the same problem as with many of the films in our corpus: their writers and directors try to cover too much thematic territory. Perhaps they are tempted to cover so much extra territory because historical colonial settings in cinema are relatively few. The public is not familiar with their themes and so their authors attempt to fill the gaps all at once. This may well be the sin of Les Caprices d’un fleuve. Giraudeau attempts many contemporaneous endeavors: to place the colony in context against the French Revolution; show its landscapes that contrast so
strongly with those of Europe; expose France’s complicity in the slave trade; trace the evolution in its governor’s thinking; and also follow his romances with two African women.

The title, Les Caprices d’un fleuve, or in English, The Whims of a River, refers as much to the contingent influences on the evolution of the main character’s life as to the actual River Senegal. The actual geographical entity arcs 800 kilometres through the southern Sahara desert in the north of Senegal, meeting the sea at Cap St-Louis, which was the capital of French West Africa until being replaced by Dakar in 1951. The main character is Jean-François de la Plaine, played by Bernard Giraudeau, and it is through his travels on this river that he is confronted by the experiences that reshape his thinking.

Jean-François has been exiled from the court of Louis XVI for killing a senior courtier in a duel, and is appointed governor of Senegal. Thus, he arrives as an arrogant aristocrat in a land peopled by what he views as savages. He is also a skilled musician and takes his spinet with him on the boat up the river. On the first journey, he observes with astonishment the navigational skills of Hannibal, who is played by African filmmaker Moussa Touré. The scene in which he has to face this astonishing ability perhaps invokes Hannibal’s skills as a hint that the African peoples also have the ability to navigate their lives. The exiled courtier then hears a woman singing with a very talented and sophisticated voice. He is shocked to learn that the woman, like Hannibal, is black.

In between these revelations taking place at the narrative level, Giraudeau, as director, is revealing the beauty of the landscapes passing by the boat. We comment elsewhere on the presentation of these landscapes in an article on this film:

The most notable, purely cinematic property of Les Caprices [d’un fleuve] is the frequency of long panning shots, primarily of the river and its surroundings, and of the desert. These shots are not linked directly to the narrative but seem to exist principally to highlight the beauty of the film’s African setting. (...) The overall effect of these shots is that of a travelogue; they announce an exotic setting. But do they really explore it?
Les Caprices d’un fleuve is the only film in the corpus for which a detailed full post-release script is available, so we can make use of it to choose an example of the shots which punctuate the narrative, but have a minimal relevance to it. The following shot appears part-way along the voyage:

226. Overall shot of the river. The flotilla, in the distance, is sailing to the right, leaving the wooded banks on the left. The music of the film is stronger and stronger, without the female voices. Very slight reframing towards the right.. In the distance, the wooded banks.  

From this description of the shot, we can easily see that it is not entirely unrelated to the narrative action taking place on board the boats. It is normal practice to have establishing shots together with those of the action. But, in the course of this journey up the River Senegal, to the destination point at Moktar Camp, these establishing shots alternate with those of the action so frequently that they compete with the action scenes instead of complementing them. In the leg of the journey from Cap St-Louis to the destination at the Camp of Moktar, the script lists 76 shots - 191 to 267. Of these, 25 are general shots of the boats and the passing river.

This strategy of running establishing shots alongside the narrative shots extends throughout the whole length of Les Caprices d’un fleuve. This gives it the impression, as we noted above, of a travelogue. This method tends to have the effect of distanc[66]ing the landscape from the human characters, which is very possibly the opposite to what was intended. The characters are in the landscape, and we see them in it, yet the sheer quantity of establishing shots, at some unconscious level, separates the two. This effect is completely the opposite to what we see in the first three films we discuss in this chapter, Walkabout, Picnic at Hanging Rock and, to a lesser degree, Chocolat. In those films, the cinematography fuses the characters and the landscapes together inextricably. In Les Caprices d’un fleuve, the humans seem detached from their physical environment, and it is a psychological detachment, not a physical one. The overall effect on the contemporary viewer is a total exoticisation of the landscape in Les
Caprices d’un fleuve. It is far away in time, because of the narrative, and far away in place, because it is in Africa. More than this, however, it is impossible ever to get to it, because from what the viewer understands from the representation of landscape in this film, the fictional characters were never really a part of it. Ultimately, though, the distancing between characters and landscape in Les Caprices d’un fleuve may also prompt the viewer to question if the French belonged there at all.

The most immediate difference between the Australian and French films chosen for analysis in this chapter is the emphasis they place on the representation of landscape. Walkabout and Picnic at Hanging Rock are, of course, highly personal views of the Australian landscape, but this does not mean that they cannot be representative of an important trend. We have chosen the French films which are most striking for the strength of their representations of landscape. Yet, even after allowing for Indochine, in none does landscape take on the role of antagonist as it does in the two Australian films. The difference is most likely explained by the desire for Australians of European origin to define their own identity within the context of their relatively recent habitat. The French living in France do not need this reassurance.

The reason for the need of Australians to define themselves is perhaps made clear by Ross Gibson. He argues that the landscape is in fact the dominant mythology of white Australia, and that the majority of Australian films have been on this topic “The landscape cinema asserts an Australian difference. The films say: “Here is a key to our identity.” He argues that the primary motivation behind this “ubiquitous leitmotive” has been the will to endow what seemed the void of terra nullius with meaning, at least for England, the land's coloniser:

Compare Terra Australis with England's 'green and pleasant land' (...) Virtually every region of England has been written into the 'sentence' of English history. East Anglia is not just arable land: it is also Constable country, habitable symbol of the pastoral dream. Cornwall connotes Celtic prehistory, where there was a beginning even before history. (...) English people perceive themselves to be inhabiting a culture that covers a countryside.
The key concept here is the last phrase, “inhabiting a culture that covers a countryside”. Organic cultures, those that develop continuously over centuries and millenia, incorporate during this evolutionary process the land they inhabit into their collective imagination through myths and legends. The intention of this is to reassure the people that they belong where they are: it is a necessary part of their identity. In England the culture “covers” the countryside, as it does in France. This “covering” is done metaphorically by their literature, mythology, customs and religions. In Australia, it is the Aboriginal cultures that “cover” the countryside in this way, and similarly in the former colonies of France, where the local cultures were formed by the Africans and the Indochinese. Films in the twentieth century have become the dominant cultural form, and every time one is released which participates in the construction or perpetuation of a national cinema, it is obviously contributing to this process.

Non-indigenous Australians inhabit a geographically discontinuous culture, and the role of many Australian films - those destined specifically for the Australian public - is to address this discontinuity. Films set in its unfamiliar interior and, in particular, films with historical settings, are important in the creation of what could be called, following Ross Gibson, a new “cultural cover” for the benefit of culturally assimilating its new dominant population to their culturally-alien landscape. The French films set in the historical colonies serve instead to reinforce the identity of the homeland with elements of its past conquering exploits, and contemporary critical reviews often accuse these films of depicting exotic landscapes and evoking nostalgia for the more glorious times of the French Empire. The most recent examples include the three films on Indochina released in 1990 (Indochine, Dien Bien Phu and The Lover/L’Amant). But not all the the postcolonial French films do this. Three films in particular, La Victoire en chantant, Coup de torchon, and Chocolat, all challenge the wisdom of the French colonial empire.
It could be argued for the French part of the corpus that much of the story in *Coup de torchon* takes place in the town, but the majority of the narrative sequences take place outside of it. In Australia, a children’s film released in 1988, *Playing Beattie Bow*, has flashbacks with scenes taking place in early colonial Sydney.


Ibid., p. 14. “Ce renversement épistémologique consisterait alors moins à complexifier ou dialectiser les relations de l’homme et de ses paysages, qu’à inverser le principe même d’objectivité et d’affirmer que la nature n’est rien qu’une représentation du sujet, qu’une construction de l’homme, et que les conditions de perception d’un paysage de notre adhésion au monde résident moins dans les lois intrinsèques des phénomènes et configurations naturelles que dans les profondeurs de notre «psyché».”


Ibid. “Un paysage en fait n’existe jamais comme une chose en soi dotée de propriétés immanentes auxquelles il faudrait se soumettre ; il n’existe qu’occupé, investi, réorienté, redimensionné par un sujet, pour lequel seul il peut devenir centre ou périphérie, point de repos ou point de fuite”.

Ibid., p. 24. “…un champ théorique rassurant, et même éculé, selon lequel tout paysage est producteur d’un état d’âme.”


Wunenberger, 1981, p. 25. “Il importe donc d’arracher cette géographie onirique à toute confusion possible avec une sorte de musée imaginaire, d’archives où seraient disposés les tableaux du monde accompagnés de rêves. L’appropriation active et perceptive de l’espace met au contraire en jeu la totalité de ce que nous sommes ; nous n’accueillons pas des états d’âmes, mais nous sommes nous-mêmes le centre d’«animation» (au sens de donner une âme), de l’espace.”

Nicholas Roeg was born in London in 1928. For more information on his extensive filmography consult <http://www.imdb.com>.

Richard Combs, ibid., p. 165.

“Montage” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* as: “The selection and arrangement of separate cinematographic shots as a consecutive whole; the blending (by superimposition) of separate shots to form a single picture; the sequence or picture resulting from such a process.”


The composer Karl-Heinz Stockhausen was born in Germany in 1928. For more information on his work consult <http://www.stockhausen.org>.

Much of the soundtrack, according to the closing credit, is from Stockhausen’s “Hymnen”, or “Hymns” in English.

In the interviews available with Nicholas Roeg on *Walkabout*, there is unfortunately no mention of research in mythology or anthropology done for the film. The three main interviews are the one mentioned above conducted by Richard Combs in *Second Take*; “None of the above: Nicholas Roeg interviewed by Nick Roddick about his films”.in *Cinema Papers*, no. 53, Sept. 1985, pp. 41-44; and by John Izod, “*Walkabout*: a wasted journey?” in *Sight and Sound*, v. 49, no. 2, 1980, pp. 113-116.

Christie, 1985, p. 10.

Ibid.

Richard Combs, ibid., p. 171.

No author attributed in the credits. We thank SBS film critic, David Stratton, for informing us that the verse is from “The Shropshire Lad”, by English poet A. E. Housman (1859-1936). The poem was written in 1896.

*Walkabout* was freely adapted from *The Children* by James Vance Marshall, published by Penguin (Ringwood, Vic., 1963), and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was freely adapted from the novel of the same name by Joan Lindsay, first published by Cheshire (Melbourne, 1967).

In reality, while the Rock is located in Victoria near Mt Macedon, the mansion shown in the film is Martindale Hall, located near Clare in South Australia.

Ibid., p. 21. L'île utopique exprime ainsi insensiblement à travers son paysage l'ensemble des valeurs intellectuelles, morales, sociales qui président à son organisation : uniformité des modes de vie, omniprésence de la loi, distribution totalitaires des droits et devoirs, etc. La topographie insulaire loge ainsi dans ses formes un monde à l'envers, un paradis renversé. Tr. John Emerson.

McFarlane, Brian. Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film. Richmond, Heinemann, 1983, p. 49.

"Euro-Australian" is a term used by David J. Tacey in Edge of the Sacred (Blackburn, Victoria, HarperCollins, 1995. See, for example, page 15.

Kaplan, op. cit., p. 166.


McFarlane, Brian. Words and Images: Australian Novels into Film. Richmond, Heinemann, 1983, p. 49.

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Chapter 3

*Images of Colonial Life I: Interracial Liaisons*

This chapter is the first of two that examine the core element of colonial life: its division, as observed by Fanon, into two worlds.\(^1\) This chapter investigates the types of relationships that are represented in the films of our corpus between a colonising individual and a colonised individual. The following chapter compares the representations of the colonising and colonised communities at the social level and, among other issues, discusses the relevance to the films in this study of the broader epistemological problem of representing other societies than one’s own.

The potential for individual relationships to embody a particular colonial situation was noted by Dina Sherzer in her essay, “Race Matters and Matters of Race”:

> Although they do not purport to document or truthfully render the past, these films stage and underscore aspects of colonial culture that have been studied by scholars of colonial culture, namely that interracial relationships are tropes that express other aspects of colonial life. They concretize how in these multiracial but highly segregated colonial societies interracial relationships were about sexual access and exploitation, class distinction, class demarcation, and identity and how they provoked violent reaction because they challenged and threatened colonial hierarchies.\(^2\)

We take Sherzer’s observation that “interracial” relationships are “tropes that express other aspects of colonial life” as a point of entry to this chapter. These relationships in the films are evidently the most intimate sites of interaction between the conqueror and the conquered. The portrayal of these relationships in films with a historical colonial setting should also be able to reveal much about the attitudes towards the colonial past of the contemporary society in which these films are produced. We can investigate, in addition, how filmmakers overcome one of the
main problems for all the films in our corpus: transposing mixed-race interpersonal relationships taking place in a past where the colonised person was legally differentiated, into a present that repudiates such ethnically founded divisions.

The relationships between individuals are given varying degrees of importance in our collection of films. At one end of the spectrum, there is no contact or hardly any at all between colonised and coloniser, the two examples of this being Picnic at Hanging Rock\(^3\) and The Man from Snowy River. At the other end, the narrative of the film takes a coloniser/colonised relationship as its central subject matter, the two best examples of this being Annaud’s L’Amant/The Lover and Honey’s Manganinnie. In between these two extremes, the degrees of prominence vary. The nature of these relationships is equally varied. It may be intimate, and we find such examples in La Victoire en chantant (Fresnoy and a black girl), The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (Jimmie and Gilda), L’Amant/The Lover (the girl and the Chinese man), Chocolat (the coffee planter and a black girl), Indochine (Camille and Jean-Baptiste) and Les Caprices d’un fleuve (Jean-François and Amélie). The master-servant relationship appears in all the films in some form and it is without exception that we find the coloniser in the master role. The most striking and complex examples of such relationships are to be found in Chocolat, between Protée the houseboy and his employer’s wife, Aimée, and between Protée and her daughter, France. Although Protée is formally the servant, he sometimes is more in control than one would expect. There is also a satirical look at this sort of relationship in La Victoire en chantant where we see servants carrying their white masters in sedan chairs and singing, the subtitles revealing their mockery of their masters’ laziness. The most obvious examples of master-servant relations in the Australian films are
without doubt in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, in the series of white landowners for whom Jimmie works.

The romantic liaison and the master-servant bond are the principal types of interracial relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, by far outweighing the third type of relationship, friendship. This type of relationship is very rarely represented in the films selected for our corpus, and this observation alone is quite revealing. The filmmakers have in general chosen to not portray stories with interracial friendships in which there are no covert layers of sexuality or power. The sole example of a roughly equal friendship is in *Manganinnie*, between the title character and the very young daughter of a white settler family. But even this friendship has to take place under unusual circumstances - the Aboriginal woman is the last survivor of her tribe, and the little girl is isolated from other children.

We begin with the very significant Master/Servant relationship in *Chocolat*, and discuss the circumstances that lead eventually to the sudden departure of the black servant, Protée. Next, we compare two romantic relationships and their outcomes, in *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Finally, we analyse the friendship in *Manganinnie*, to determine what impact it has on the overall representation of Australia’s colonial past. In our conclusion, we wish to weigh up to what extent these relationships reinforce or challenge the colonial past of France and Australia.

**Master/Servant: Chocolat**

The various interracial relationships in Claire Denis’ *Chocolat* have already attracted the attention of scholars - particularly the relationship between the native servant, Protée and the wife of his employer, Aimée Dalens. Ien Ang compares
France’s relationship with Protée as a child with the acquaintance she strikes up thirty years later with William, an African American living in Cameroon. She concludes that the outcome of these relationships implies that there is no means of overcoming France’s colonial past:

The film, then, problematises the difficulty, if not impossibility, of an unproblematic post-colonial re-encounter (and reconciliation) between coloniser and colonised, because those who were colonised have changed, no longer defining themselves in terms of dependency and marginalisation, no longer in silent, private and impotent wrath and suppressed desire as was the overtly loyal Protée, but busy transforming the colonial legacy into an emergent, self-determined identity, a society of their own. (...) If Chocolat can be read as a recognition of European inability to come to terms with its own colonialist record, it does so without offering us a way out of the repressed crisis of identity which remains so unacknowledged in the larger European context.4

Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan, whose study we previously cited in the chapter on landscape, compares these two relationships of the character France, concluding:

As part of the ambivalence of the colonial relation, Denis shows that there is more distance if not difference between France and William in the 1980s Cameroon than there was between France and Protée under ambivalent colonialism.5

Kaplan is arguing that, although France and William meet in postcolonial Cameroon with similar ambitions of transcending their respective colonial legacies, they in fact have less in common than France had as a child in colonial Cameroon with her black houseboy, Protée. France and Protée were both under the common authority of France’s parents, the reasons being that France was young and that Protée was black. But France and William have little common heritage at all. Although he is black and she is white, William is also a migrant to Africa, being born in America.

The key point of the central interracial relationship in Chocolat, the one between Protée and Aimée, is that the black servant refused to acquiesce to Aimée’s desire for an intimate relationship. The significance of this point is confirmed by the film’s director, Claire Denis:

I was, however, strongly advised to construct an affair between Protée, the male black servant in the film, and the white woman. The producers saw this outcome as good box office. But this would have totally destroyed what the film was about for me, so I resisted the pressure to alter the script. When it came to doing the scene in which Protée resists the possibility of a
sexual encounter with the woman, I shot it quickly in one take, before anyone could even attempt to suggest an alternative. (...) Protée’s refusal was the purpose of the film. 6 Protée’s refusal takes place at a general point in the film where the spectator has been familiarised with Protée’s ambivalent attitude towards his position. On the one hand, he is passively obedient to the orders he is given by Marc, Aimée and France, but on the other, he silently and privately resents his powerlessness. At this point also, we have been made aware of the unspoken mutual attraction between Aimée and Protée. There is firstly the mirror scene, in which Protée fastens the back of Aimée’s dress in front of the dressing-table mirror, so that they are not only both in close physical proximity, but can see this, and furthermore, see that the other one also sees it. Secondly, during the construction of an emergency runway, we witness this dialogue between a female visitor and Aimée:

Visitor: He is handsome.
Aimée: Who?
Visitor: Your servant. 7

Aimée glances quickly at Protée in the distance but guards her silence. In a later scene, Luc Segalen, the anachronistic hippy who had been having an affair with the same woman who remarks on Protée’s looks, tells Aimée that he knows she would rather be out there in the yard rubbing against Protée. After this dialogue comes the scene in which Protée throws Luc out, then the scene in which Aimée makes an advance to him as he closes the curtains for the night.

In order to fully understand the motives behind Protée’s rejection of Aimée, we need to bring it into context with the relationship between Protée and Luc. The character of Luc Segalen is introduced in the second half of the film, and he is present for around twenty-five minutes. Luc arrives as the emergency airstrip is being started. Marc Dalens’s neighbour Randall brings several dozen of his black staff on a
truck to help level the land. Randall has also brought his wife, Monique. Luc has been staying with them, but he has chosen to travel on the truck with the blacks. Randall introduces Luc to Marc as he descends from the truck, significantly not introducing the black workers, of course. Luc nods and continues with the workers, taking up a pick-axe and beginning to level out a mound of raised soil.

Thus we see immediately that Luc breaks the conventional divisions that exist between black and white, colonised and coloniser. Marc finds this deeply disturbing, and brings Luc to the tent where the whites sit, watching the blacks dig. Later, when Luc chooses to sleep outside on the verandah, Marc once again attempts to convince him to sleep inside, but Luc rejects the offer. He also prefers to use the black servants’ shower, and to take his meals with them.

Luc immediately recognises Protée’s ambivalent sentiments towards his position within the household. The white man’s reaction is to tease Protée, presumably with the idea of causing the servant to acknowledge his unhappiness and rebel. Luc does this firstly by his very use of the facilities set aside for the blacks. Protée resents this as much as Marc, but probably for different reasons. When Protée sees Luc in the outdoor shower, he tells him it is for the servants. Luc’s response is: “You are bugging me!” But while Marc is concerned about Luc breaking down the divisions separating blacks from whites, Protée would view Luc’s presence as no less than an invasion of black space. The one consolation in the separation of blacks from whites is that the whites do not go into the blacks’ quarters, thus these spaces are an area of temporary retreat from white dominance. Luc is trespassing into this space, and Protée would see this as an abuse of power, since he can not make the same decision to trespass on white facilities. Luc completes his move into the quarters allotted to the servants when he tells Aimée that he will no longer be eating in the
house. He does instead sleep on the verandah, an area that can be imagined as a fringe zone between the two worlds.

Luc’s role in Chocolat is very much that of an outsider. On the one hand, he is introduced as a seducer of other men’s wives. We learn in the scene at the airstrip that he slept with his previous boss’s wife. His attitude towards Protée can be partly explained by jealousy: Luc knows Aimée is attracted to Protée, and as a consequence, he will not be able to seduce her. On the other hand, there is a side to Luc’s character that is particularly relevant to the issue of colonialism. Luc appears to be rejecting the racial segregation of colonial society: rejecting the privileges enjoyed by whites and blaming the Africans for accepting their inferior position as much as he does the French for imposing it. But if Luc wishes to erase the boundaries between coloniser and colonised, then it is certainly consistent to try to shake the African servant out of his passivity. He has already been deliberately rude in the shower scene and he continues this strategy in the scene where he is reading a passage to Aimée from an 1891 colonial diary by Marshal Lyautey on the subject of differences in skin colour. Protée brings a tray with lemonade and waits to be given the signal to serve it. Luc impatiently tells him to leave it. In a later scene, Marc calls his doctor to assist one of the women passengers from the aeroplane. Her husband rejects the doctor, Prosper, when he sees that the medical man is black. Luc enters and, parodies the white man’s horror, saying to Prosper: “A doctor! You are only fit to wipe white arses!”

In Luc’s final scene, he switches from rudeness to accusing the blacks openly of being responsible for their servitude. He starts off by teasing Protée, who is cleaning up the verandah before retiring to bed, but without eliciting any response. He continues:

Luc: Son a bitch! Come on, beat it! Go and lick your bosses’ boots. You’re worse than the priests who tamed you.
Protée finally responds. He picks Luc up and throws him off the verandah and then his bag after him. This moment is the turning point that leads to the resolution of the film. But how is his accusation to be interpreted? Is Claire Denis also accusing the colonised of being partly responsible for their position? Chocolat is one of the most radically anti-colonial films in our corpus, so it is unlikely that Luc’s accusal is a defence of colonialism. What seems to be the case is that Luc is the character that best crystallises the changing sentiments of the pre-independence colonial period. He prefigures the point of view that Claire Denis - represented by the child France - will eventually hold. Luc’s accusation is not a literal one. The key to understanding this scene is found in his character’s earlier scenes where we witness the way in which he refuses the power that is automatically given to him as a white. He travels on the back of the truck, he works on the runway with the blacks, he showers in the outdoor shower, he refuses the offer of a room. When Luc provokes Protée into throwing him out, he goes one step further: from simply refusing the power, he transfers it into Protée’s hands, by whatever means it takes. The accusation itself is a mere tool used in order to achieve this. Once Protée has had the courage to deal with Luc, he realises that he has the courage to resist his masters, and shortly after, he does.

In the scene that directly follows, Protée rejects Aimée’s advance in the bedroom, where she grabs his ankle as he closes her curtains. As a result of this rejection, he is removed from household service at Aimée’s request, and is sent to work in the garage. In his last scene, he is in the generator shed and France enters. There is no dialogue. Protée grabs the hot water pipe and holds it without changing expression. France grabs it too, and squeals with pain as she lets go, badly burnt. The significance of that scene is to show that he too - and by extension, the African
peoples - have been burnt by their experience with European colonisation, and he wanted France to know how it felt.

Protée’s decision to rebel symbolically captures the moment when the indigenous African people decided that the time had come to throw out the coloniser and take their future into their own hands. In this way, this particular relationship between a black servant and his mistress becomes a trope for a greater and much more complex social movement.

**Romantic Liaisons: Les Caprices d’un fleuve and The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith**

The master/servant relationship is an obvious synecdoche of power relations generally. More subtle is the romantic relationship, and for this reason, it is interesting to see what power relations are revealed by a romance between coloniser and colonised. One French film that centres its narrative on a coloniser/colonised love affair is *Les Caprices d’un fleuve*, written and directed by Bernard Giraudeau and released in 1996. None of the Australian films in our corpus are centered so strongly as in this film on an interracial love affair, but the relationship between Jimmie Blacksmith and Gilda in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), which we examine next, is exceptional in highlighting particular aspects of colonial relations in Australia at the time of Federation.

The title of *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* refers to both the river in Senegal leading off from its old capital, Cap St. Louis, and to the direction of the life of the main character, Jean-François de la Plaine. The *caprices du fleuve* imply the *caprices du sort*, the whims of fate. Jean-François is exiled from the French court to be the governor of what is now Senegal. Bit by bit, the arrogant ex-courtier from Versailles becomes disgusted by the injustices carried out by the French, while simultaneously
learning to appreciate the local indigenous culture. On the surface, this film appears
to challenge the wisdom of France’s colonisation of Africa.

The primary catalyst for this change in Jean-François is the gift of a very young black slave girl from a Moor king. The new governor names the girl Amélie and decides to educate her, with the aim of sending her eventually to his Versailles mistress, Louise, for use as a servant. He removes her from the slave compound and gives her a bedroom in the house. Thus the initial relationship between Jean-François and Amélie is that of master-slave.

To indicate Amélie’s progression into her teens, the first actress is replaced by a second, Aïssatou Sow. The first sign that Jean-François is developing a personal bond with his gift from the Moor reveals itself at a dinner with slave traders. He expels one of his guests, a French captain, for insulting her, saying that she is his daughter. But Jean-François’s special treatment of the young black girl will remain exclusive to her: the loyal governor does not befriend any of the other blacks of the compound, such as the old servant Siméon. Siméon is old and male, not young and female, and Jean-François only treats him with contempt.

He stops writing to Louise in France and breaks off a casual affair with a wealthy half-caste slave trader, Anne. When he discovers that Amélie has run away, confused about her privileged treatment, Jean-François does not hesitate to take a team of soldiers into the desert to search for the girl. They save her from slave traders and bring her back. This rescue operation acts as a form of rebirth for the relationship between Jean-François and Amélie. She is transformed from daughter to lover. A key scene signals not only her complete replacement of Louise in this role but also the impossibility of her being recognised as a prototypical European. She surprises Jean-François by entering his office wearing Louise’s formal ball gown and a blonde wig,
which he must have brought with him. He orders her to remove the European attire, making it quite clear that it is suitable for a white woman only, and that she is beautiful in her native sarongs.

This is a very ambiguous scene. It is not clear if Jean-François has lost his interest in the sophistries of French courtesanship, or if he disapproves of a black woman daring to wear a dress that is part of this society. He himself continues to wear the wig and fine costumes. It is also possible that Bernard Giraudeau wants to show that his main character has come to challenge the Enlightenment belief in the universality of civilisation and recognise that Africans are different, and are not just primitive versions of Europeans.

Amélie becomes pregnant by Jean François but he is recalled to France by the Convention. Before leaving, he asks his friend Pierre to write an essay on difference. This request is perhaps the key didactic point of the film, indicating that the man embodying Enlightenment thought has indeed rethought the philosophy of his era. The Enlightenment philosophers believed that mankind was universal, and that cultural differences could be explained by their degree of progress towards its peak, which according to them, Europe had already attained. But Jean-François seemed to have predated Bronislaw Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss by two centuries and realised that non-European cultures are not primitive versions of Europe.9

The film’s narrator takes over the conclusion of the film. We had learnt at the beginning that this was the story of the narrator’s father, and we learn at the end that his mother is Amélie, and that she had died during his birth. The closing scene shows Jean-François back in Cap Saint-Louis standing on the beach with his very young son. Pierre, we learn from our narrator, died of a fever without writing about difference. The one character who would have done some good, had he lived, died
before he could produce his revelation. The message emerging from this ending is that France recognised her errors as a colonising nation much earlier than history was able to document. Giraudieu is attempting to convince his French audience that France was a more understanding coloniser than the historical records suggest.

How can we interpret the relationship between Jean-François and Amélie? Reduced to its basic elements, Les Caprices d’un fleuve is nothing more than the domination of a disenfranchised African female by a ruling class European male. The male is in his forties and the female is in her teens. It is notable that Jean-François does not develop an enduring relationship with the older Anne, the rich and beautiful half-caste slave trader. Since films contribute to mythology and symbolism like any narrative art form, each of the two lovers can be interpreted as the incarnation of their race, with their age being representative of the status of their race. In this way, the narrative structure reinforces the myth of Europe being old and Africa being new.

This relationship is also represented against a noticeably exoticised landscape. Les Caprices d’un fleuve is particularly striking for the numerous long panning shots, primarily of the river and its surroundings, and of the sweeping dunes of the desert. These shots are not linked to the narrative. They exist principally to highlight the film’s African setting without really exploring it. They are composed of stock images that recur - deserts, camels, rivers. All these wonderful panoramas of the African landscape show the audience nothing that they have not already seen. The resulting images are consequently reinforcing and perpetuating European stereotypes of Africa and not offering anything to challenge them.

This exoticisation extends to the representation of the African people. We see almost nothing of their private lives, and therefore learn nothing of their intimate feelings. What we do see portrayed in the film is a degenerate community living from
the trading of slaves, a community which appears to need protecting from its own excesses. This notion manifests most succinctly in the scene where Jean-François asks Amélie who will protect her when he leaves. The fact that he returns at the very end of the film reinforces the belief that Africa still needs protection from France. The resolution of Les Caprices d’un fleuve offers no resolution to the problematic French colonial heritage. The choice to focus the narrative on a love affair recalls Auguste Pavie’s observation in 1893 that France pretended that it was not expanding its empire, but conquering hearts.10

Although there are proportionately many more Australian films depicting the colonial past, none have founded a narrative principally on a coloniser/colonised relationship in the same way that Les Caprices d’un fleuve and L’Amant/The Lover have done, and to a certain extent, Indochine. One reason is possibly that neither Aboriginal Australians nor Australia can be exoticised in the same way to its primarily Australian audience, since exoticisation’s first requirement is distance. The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is primarily about the attempt of half-caste Jimmie to be accepted by white Australians and his revolt when he is rejected. Nevertheless, a major component of the film is Jimmie’s marriage to Gilda, a white girl, thus making it the only Australian film in which there is an interracial romantic relationship. It is also the only film in all the corpus in which this sort of relationship is portrayed positively.

Jimmie Blacksmith meets Gilda a third of the way into the film. At this stage, he has tried twice to work as a fencing contractor and has just left the police force after the shock of the death of Harry Edwards. He finds a job sweeping a shearing shed, and it is when he goes to help in the kitchen that he meets Gilda. She is in the arms of the cook, played by the author of the book, Thomas Keneally, who pushes her
away very quickly. Gilda does nothing but giggle in the first few scenes in which she features. She is white and pretty, but certainly not the “white girl of good stock” that Jimmie’s foster parents, the Nevilles, had intended.

Gilda’s and Jimmie’s relationship begins when they have sex in the barn without comment, and Gilda’s first piece of dialogue is: “Not bad for a white girl!” Yet these primitive beginnings are the foundation of a durable, affectionate and loyal relationship. From this scene, the narrative jumps almost nine months, and we find Jimmie on a different farm, finishing off a hut ready for Gilda’s arrival. When they marry, Gilda is very obviously close to giving birth. The farm owners, the Newbys, seem relatively kind. Mr Newby lends his horse so that Gilda does not have to walk to Jimmie’s hut, and Mrs Newby will allow Gilda to give birth in the farmhouse.

The first test to the bond between Jimmie and Gilda is not the girl’s disappointment when she sees the rudeness of her new home, but when she gives birth to a completely white boy. It means that perhaps the cook, or any of the other men on the previous farm, is the father, not Jimmie. He is very disappointed. Even more importantly to the representation of this relationship, Gilda is very distressed. Her repeated apologies demonstrate that she genuinely wished to found a family with Jimmie, that she had not married him just because she found herself pregnant; she sincerely believed that she was carrying his child.

At the symbolic level, however, the birth of the white child does signify a defeat for Jimmie. Even in the womb, the white man has again triumphed. At the most elemental level, Jimmie was unable to beat the white man to the egg. Once again the plan for his life discussed at the Nevilles’ dinner table has been thwarted. Instead of marrying a white girl in order that his children would be quarter-cast, and his grandchildren one-eighth-cast, and, as the good Reverend Neville said, “scarcely
black at all”, he has been cuckolded. But Gilda loves Jimmie, and he forgives her. The marriage survives.

The second test to which this delicate bond is subjected applies at the social rather than at the individual level. Gilda arrives at the homestead on Friday to place her weekly grocery order as is the arrangement, but finds her order refused. Mr Newby will not supply groceries or pay Jimmie because two of Jimmie’s black relations are staying with him. Gilda is permitted to go into the kitchen. This is where we see the most obvious example of society’s disapproval of the union of a white girl with a black man. Mrs Newby and Miss Graf try and talk Gilda into leaving Jimmie, offering her a job and place to live. Gilda is devastated, saying: “But I’m married to Jimmie. A Christian marriage.” By invoking the institutional validation of her relationship, her response highlights the contrast between official Christianity and its actual practice. Gilda’s unbroken loyalty to Jimmie in the face of pressure from several members of a superior social group is the most positive image of an interracial bond in all the films of this study.

This crucial moment when the image of the interracial bond is portrayed at its strongest and most positive, is also the catalyst for Jimmie’s declaration of war against his oppressors. When Gilda returns and tells him that they have no food and that the Newby women are trying to convince her to leave, Jimmie realises that once again he has been cheated. He also realises that he will never be treated as an equal by a white no matter how hard he works, and no matter that he is married to a white girl. He goes to challenge his dishonest and racist employer and meets a total refusal to admit wrong or to negotiate. When Jimmie is forced to flee after the murders he commits on the Newby family, he is also forced to separate from Gilda and the baby. Her parting words are: “Jimmie, dearest.”
We only see Gilda again in the courtroom when Jimmie’s uncle is tried for the murders. There she discovers from his story that he had come to visit originally in order to tell Jimmie that he "shouldn’t have married a white girl". The look on her face is one of deep sadness. She knows, and through her, the viewer recognises, that love in an interracial relationship is no different from any other relationship. The difference is that colonial society cannot accept it. What emerges from The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is that although the racial pressure applied against Jimmie by his colonisers was so intense that it led him to commit a series of murders, it did not break Gilda’s love for him, or her commitment to their marriage. If one can read a message embedded in this romance, it is that it did not have a happy ending because of the racism of those outside the relationship, not because of any inherent factors within it. As with the doomed relationship between Jean-François de la Plaine and Amélie, both filmmakers are ultimately demonstrating that the imbalance of power between the coloniser and colonised was so great that close individual relationships across their division were impossible.

**A rare case: friendship between coloniser and colonised in Manganinnie**

Friendships are interpersonal relationships based on equal footing. It is to be expected that during the colonial period the colonising and colonised peoples would have felt the power imbalance between them in their divided society, and that this situation would have made normal friendships difficult. In the films chosen for our corpus, friendships between a character belonging to the colonised community and a character belonging to the colonising one are rarely represented. When we do see friendships in the films, we need to examine their credibility. We need to determine
if a cross-colonial friendship is anachronistic and, if so, if it is a sign of the politics of the period in which the film is released.

In the French films, we see friendship only in *Fort Saganne*. This is between Lieutenant Saganne and Amajar, one of the Berber tribal leaders. But even in this example, the French character saves the Berber’s life, thus tilting the balance in his favour. In the Australian films we see cross-colonial friendships in two films, in *Manganinnie*, which we are about to examine, and in *Robbery Under Arms*. The latter film is based on the novel by Rolf Boldrewood, who claims it to be based on reality:

> But though presented in the guise of fiction, this chronicle of the Marston family must not be set down by the reader as wholly fanciful or exaggerated. Much of the narrative is literally true, as can be verified in official records.\(^{11}\)

The interest to us, if *Robbery Under Arms* is based on fact, is the friendship between Captain Starlight and the part-Aboriginal character, Warrigal. In the book and in the fourth film version, the one in our corpus, Warrigal is a major character. But did this friendship actually exist? There is no record of it, despite Boldrewood’s claim that much of the narrative is verifiable. Frank Clune analyses the Starlight character in *Captain Starlight: Reckless Rascal of “Robbery Under Arms”*, and finds that he is based on three bushrangers and cattle thieves, the first nicknamed “Midnight”, the second, “Captain Moonlight”, and the third, Harry Redford.\(^{12}\) He does not mention any friendships with a part-Aboriginal. Therefore, we cannot verify the existence of this friendship, but simply acknowledge that it was a major theme in the original novel, and not an anachronism.

The friendship that we will focus on here is in *Manganinnie* (John Honey, 1980), an important film in the depiction of Australian colonial life. It is an adaptation of the children’s book of the same title by Beth Roberts.\(^{13}\) The story is distinguished firstly by having the earliest setting of any Australian colonial feature,
1836, and second, by being one of the rare films in which the narrative is driven by a friendship between a white and a black.\textsuperscript{14}

The problem is whether this friendship takes place under circumstances that are too exceptional to have any useful representational value. Another problem is the choice of the particular setting date of 1836, specified at the start of the film. The caption announcing the date suggests that the film identifies its story with documented history:

The last full-blooded survivor of the Tasmanian aboriginal race was a woman. She died in 1876.

Manganinnie dies around a year after the story begins: thus in about 1837. It is not clear what the connection is between her and the last survivor, Truganini. The story of Manganinnie is obviously being suggested as a substitute for Truganini’s. The reason for this may be that the filmmakers wanted the liberty to construct a story that better matches the dictates of Western storytelling traditions. That is the argument put forward by Sean Maynard:

\textit{Manganinnie} is a successful \textit{European} film. Despite some fine passages here and there from the director John Honey, it is very much a film of its writer, Ken Kelso. His script is splendidly illustrated by Honey but the ideas are Kelso’s. The Manganinnie story itself is a marvellous piece of European folklore - the legend of the keeper of the flame. What Kelso has done is to adapt Aboriginal people, some mysterious Aboriginal ways and a landscape, to this folk story. \textit{Manganinnie} is a successful piece of European folklore that just happens to use Aboriginal people and a Tasmanian setting.\textsuperscript{15}

We should be able to agree that \textit{Manganinnie} is a “keeper of the flame” story, and as such may well conform to European folklore tradition.\textsuperscript{16} The risk in this approach is that the representation of Manganinnie’s culture will necessarily be distorted. The film does have another facet which may compensate for this. Within the structure of this Western narrative frame, \textit{Manganinnie} is also about emotions and feelings. It could be argued that it attempts to eradicate the artificial cultural divisions between
Aborigines and Europeans by showing the similarity in basic human feelings, such as loneliness and the need for sustained social contact.

Returning to the film’s identification with the last Tasmanian Aborigine, Anne Hutton discusses the television documentary The Last Tasmanian (Tom Haydon, 1978), in an article written while she awaited the release of John Honey’s film. She finds The Last Tasmanian diverts attention from the present problems of the descendants of Tasmanian Aborigines by neatly separating the past from the present:

A part of the documentary aspect of this film is the state funeral and the casting of Truganini’s ashes (the last full-blood Tasmanian Aborigine) out to sea, expressed by the Tasmanian government as ‘righting the wrong that was allowed to occur in 1878’. Like Jimmie Blacksmith, the film is concerned with guilt about past actions, but disclaims the existence of today’s problems and therefore any responsibility for them.17

At the time this article was written, Manganinnie had not been released, but Hutton knew of its content. She says that it was “unlikely to overcome the problems of its predecessors”.18 The problem is that Manganinnie is not just the story of any Aborigine dying, but that it identifies itself with the death of the last Aborigine in Tasmania. By doing that, it could be argued that, like the Tom Haydon documentary, it recounts a narrative that closes the past. As such, it does not provoke reflection on the present. Moore and Muecke argue even further from this position, that Manganinnie acts as a purge:

Tasmanian Aborigines feel that representations of the demise of their people (The Last Tasmanian, Manganinnie) write them out of existence just as they are struggling to gain political effectivity. Representations of Tasmanian Aborigines are thus constructed and appropriated by those who for different reasons wish to reconstruct the past (archaeology, historical dramatisation), while a white audience position is set up which is comforting for those who wish to be assured that the trouble is over. Manganinnie thus functions as a cathartic experience identical to that described by Kathe Boehringer for Women of the Sun: ‘Feeling bad about the past is, in some ways, a barrier to understanding it; resolving to ‘be better’ in the future may make us feel more noble momentarily’.19

If we recall Pierre Sorlin’s observation mentioned in the Introduction that “historical tradition is only an instrument for talking about the present”;20 it becomes even more believable that Manganinnie could indeed work to absolve contemporary audiences of guilt.
Given these misgivings about the folkloric narrative and the relationship of the film to actual history and current problems, can the friendship which develops between Manganinnie and Joanna, the ten year old white girl have any credibility? We can firstly discuss the circumstances that permit the friendship to occur.

In the first fifteen minutes of the film, we see various brief scenes of the tribe of which Manganinnie is the keeper of the firestick, the Singing River People. The narrator, who is the adult Joanna, explains that the tribe does not know how to start a fire, and so must always keep the firestick burning. As she explains this, Manganinnie is speaking to her people, and we infer that they are being told the same thing. We also notice that many of the Singing River People wear hair dyed bright red or red hair-pieces formed of feathers.

In between the brief shots of the tribe dancing and singing, are scenes of Joanna’s family life. Her father is a severe Methodist who solemnly reads his four children bible stories each night. One morning, soldiers arrive and announce that they are going to clear up the problem of Aborigines in the area who are stealing food and trespassing. Joanna’s father’s response is curious: “There are not many people who’d be happy to be removed from their own land.” He displays all the signs of a well-to-do landowner himself: immaculately dressed, his house has two large stories and several outbuildings. His statement is inconsistent with his own presence in the colony, but not with his religion presumably – or with the open attitude that he must have transferred to his daughter.

The following morning the Singing River Aborigines are chased off and shot at. Manganinnie hides in some bushes and is thus not pursued. She waits until it is safe, and when she emerges, all she finds is one of her tribe shot dead. The rest have disappeared. She wails with despair and builds a pyre for the body. This scene in the
film is almost unique in both Australian and French cinema for actually portraying
the method by which white colonisers took the land from the indigenous people. In
all the other films, this has already been accomplished. Even in The Chant of Jimmie
Blacksmith, the land has been taken, and the surviving blacks huddle in huts erected
on land that was deemed unsuitable at the time for agriculture. In the film with the
earliest setting, Les Caprices d’un fleuve, the land has similarly already been
appropriated. In Fort Saganne, the soldiers’ mission is not to acquire land, but to
stem the resistance resulting from that having already been done. As mentioned in
the Historiography chapter, the initial act of colonisation itself is a topic which is
usually deemed too sensitive to be represented.

Thus for this scene alone, Manganinnie is an important film in the cinema
representation of Australia’s history. In leaving one survivor, the film is best able to
illustrate the effect on an individual Aborigine of the destruction of his or her
lifestyle. Without any one but herself, Manganinnie is left to wander the forest and
skulk behind trees and in caves to avoid detection. Her only solace is the firestick
which she keeps alive with her breath, and which symbolises the spirit of her people.

In this way the story prepares the conditions that allow the meeting of
Manganinnie and Joanna. The Aboriginal woman has been separated from her tribal
community, and Joanna wanders off from her father during a picnic. The actual
moment of meeting does stretch credulity. Joanna is standing by the creek, gazing
into the water and she sees Manganinnie’s reflection. She looks up to see the
Aboriginal woman blowing on her torch. The little girl is curious, and crosses the
creek. Manganinnie slowly backs away and Joanna follows. At this point the girl
appears so mesmerised that she does not seem to react to her father’s calls. It is
difficult to accept that Manganinnie’s blowing on the firestick would be so hypnotic
that it could override Joanna’s bond to her father. We see Manganinnie use this technique again when searchers come past the cave in which she is hiding with Joanna. The girl watches the Aboriginal woman blowing on the burning stick of fire, and does not acknowledge her name being called, despite the fact the callers are just outside.

Manganinnie’s motives for enticing Joanna become clear very quickly. She has no one to whom she can pass on her knowledge since her tribe was dispersed, and her sense of tradition is so strong that she chooses a young white child still not completely encumbered by her own culture. Joanna progressively becomes a sort of an honorary member of the Singing River people, the eventual sole heir to their culture. This is quite a politically sensitive development in the plot. It could be interpreted as surrender at the most profound level, the conquered is forced to make the conqueror the heir to her culture.

*Manganinnie* is a film in which it is difficult to judge whether it augments or diminishes empathy for Aborigines and the impact of European colonisation. It is easy to agree with the critics we mentioned, notably with Hutton’s point that the narrative avoids any link with the present problems of those Tasmanians who have Aboriginal heritage, and Moore and Muecke’s that it reassures us that “the trouble is over”. The film hardly offers the viewer any genuine insight into Manganinnie’s real feelings. Yet it may also be the case that white viewers in the early stages of the postcolonial era need a gentle introduction into the cultures they previously dismissed as redundant. If using the lure of a familiar narrative structure, such as the myth of the keeper of the fire, and adding a reassuring narrator to act as guide comprises such an introduction, then this film could be seen to make a contribution. It should be commended for its attempt to demonstrate that personal relations are possible
between individuals of differing cultures, if they can be separated from the social constraints that normally disallow this.

The outcome of the relationships between coloniser and colonised discussed in this chapter is permanent separation in some form. Manganinnie dies, Jimmie Blacksmith dies, Amélie dies and Protée leaves. If we look at the other films depicting interracial relationships, we notice that this characteristic is uniform. The relationship in *Indochine* between Jean-Baptiste and Camille ends with his death. The girl’s affair in *L’Amant/The Lover* with the Chinese man ends with her departure to France. Captain Starlight is also killed in *Robbery Under Arms*. If this is compared with the happy outcome of white relationships in Hollywood films, the contrast is obvious. If we recall Dina Sherzer’s hypothesis that these relationships are tropes of colonial life, then contemporary filmmakers are anxious to show that the colonial period was never going to lead to a permanently harmonious relationship between the colonising and indigenous peoples. Their common narrative choices do not suggest either that the different cultures have the possibility before them of existing side by side. There will ultimately be conflict, and one of them will either die or leave permanently. The coloniser, as the more powerful, invariably remains the winner.

In *Walkabout*, which we discussed in the previous chapter, the interracial romance is not even allowed to begin. This is similar to the way in which Claire Denis sets up a sexual tension between Aimée and Protée, but prevents an actual relationship from developing. *Walkabout*’s filmmaker has thrown together two sexually mature teenagers from opposing cultures. The editing sequence in numerous shots indicates to us clearly that the white girl is physically attracted to the black boy. In turn, he seems both to recognise this attraction to him, and to be attracted to her.
The sexual tension builds until the boy tries to found a relationship with the girl, but she refuses. He only does this after they have discovered an abandoned homestead so that she can resume the settled life of a white. In other words, the black boy is prepared to adapt from his nomadic lifestyle to live in a settled one with her. But she is not prepared to depart from her preference for city life. So the refusal in *Walkabout* is in fact the opposite of the one in *Chocolat*. In the Australian film, it is the indigenous person who tries to establish interracial relations, not the coloniser. But the settings and contexts are quite different. The Aborigine in *Walkabout* is prepared to establish a white lifestyle according to his own terms, but Protée was rejecting a lifestyle he had not chosen.

An interesting point that emerges in this chapter is that although all the personal relationships represented in the films selected for our corpus end permanently, this does not appear to be related to the filmmakers’ stance towards colonialism. This applies equally to the French and Australian sides of the corpus. *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* defends the French colonisation of Africa, *Chocolat* criticises it; *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is strongly opposed to the British settlement of Australia, while *Manganinnie* is more ambiguous. We see a similar pattern among the other films of the corpus without having necessarily analysed them at length. Regardless of whether filmmakers defend or oppose Europe’s colonisation activities, they do not create relationships in their films that would signal a future in mixed-race postcolonial societies. So far, it appears that the racial division that characterised colonial society remains unchallenged. Our next step is to see whether this division is challenged at the social level.
3 There is in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* an Aboriginal character, who plays the role of an Aboriginal tracker, but who has no speaking part.
6 Duncan Petrie, op. cit., p. 67.
7 The English dialogues we quote from this film are borrowed from the sub-titles provided by SBS, unless an error is detected. The original French: Visitor: Il est beau; Aimée: Qui ça ?; Visitor: Ton boy.
8 Approximate rendition of: “Tu me casses les pieds!” Tr. John Emerson.
9 Malinowski transformed anthropology in the early twentieth century when he broke with evolutionary theories to interpret his Trobriand research. Claude Lévi-Strauss impacted on anthropology in 1949 with *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, further demonstrating the diversity of cultures.
11 Rolf Boldrewood. *Robbery Under Arms*. London, Macmillan, 1915 (1889), Preface, no page number. Boldrewood, whose real name was Thomas Browne, was a squatter and then Police Magistrate.
14 Another example being *Storm Boy* (Henri Safran, 1976).
16 Two other examples from cinema of this myth are found in Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *La Guerre du feu* (1981), based on the novel by J. H. Rosny Aîné (joint pseudonym of brothers Seraphim and Joseph Boex), and George Cukor’s *Keeper of the Flame* (1942).
18 Ibid., p. 337.
21 The taking of land violently is also depicted at length in Episode I: “Alinta the Flame” of the television drama *Women of the Sun*. Land appropriation from Aborigines has not been shown in any other film made for cinema in Australia to our knowledge.
Chapter 4

Images of Colonial Life II: Social Conflict

Following on from the previous chapter where we examined the portrayal of individual relationships between the coloniser and the colonised, we will extend the examination of the two sides of the colonial division to their representation and interaction as social groups. We should recall at this point that a colony is defined within this thesis according to whether a distinction exists officially between citizens according to their status as coloniser or colonised. In other words, the core distinction between the ruler and the ruled is founded on race, a fact also observed by Albert Memmi:

Racism summarises and symbolises the fundamental relation uniting coloniser and colonised.

To understand if and how race and racism operate in the various representations of indigenous and white communities in the films of our corpus, we will need first to establish what these terms mean, at least within the confines of this study. The objective of this chapter is to analyse the components of colonial society that are represented in selected films from the corpus, and to determine if the racial division is genuinely challenged, and if it is, by what means, and with what results. Thus prepared, we will compare the representation of indigenous communities to that of the white groups, taking into account along the way the type of characters who link the two together.

Defining Race and Racism

Racism is a very ambiguous concept and is one of the most sensitive and passionately debated topics of the contemporary period. Michael Banton and Robert Miles offer the following definition:
The deterministic ascription of real or supposed negative characteristics to a particular group is generally seen as a central characteristic of racism as ideology.  

Racism is founded on a belief in the existence of races, and the term “race”, according to Pierre L. Van den Berghe, is currently used by social scientists to define a social group distinguished by somatic visibility. This means a social group is visibly identifiable because its individuals share similar skin pigmentation, hair texture, stature, and so on. Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes between racism, which he calls a behaviour, and racialism, which he calls a doctrine:

Let it suffice to say that the most popular classification works with three races: white, yellow and black. However, the ordinary racialist simplifies this already-impoverished schema even further: for this sort of racialist there are only two real races, or rather two poles, white and black, between which all the races are arrayed (yellow is an intermediate form). This opposition may have captured attention for reasons that have to do with universal symbolism: white-black, light-dark, day-night pairings seem to exist and function in all cultures, with the first term of each pair generally preferred. The history of humanity, being what it is, the exemplary racism, racism *par excellence*, is thus that of whites towards blacks.

A very good example of this type of attitude can be seen on the first page of Sir Harry Johnston’s 1920 text, published by Oxford University, entitled *The Backward Peoples and Our Relations with them*:

The chief and obvious distinction between the backward and the forward peoples is that the former, with the exception of about 20,000,000 in the Mediterranean basin and the Near East, are of coloured skin; while the latter are white-skinned or, as in the case of the Japanese and the inhabitants of Northern China, nearly white.

These are the words of a Knight of the British Empire being distributed through the most distinguished academic publisher in the Western world. The connotations are as obvious as its flaws. Backward people are backward (a term which, within the framework of the Western myth of progress, is synonymous with inferior) because they are not white, but in this one sentence, Sir Harry is forced to provide extraordinarily spurious exceptions, thus reducing his argument to the vapid rhetoric that it is.

Films produced in France and in Australia during the colonial period itself with colonial settings have been shown to contain stories and filming techniques which reproduce and justify the racial division separating coloniser from colonised. Abdelkader Benali demonstrates in *Le Cinéma colonial au Magreb* that this division is
represented and reinforced at all levels, in the narratives, in the staging (where Arabs are usually placed in the background or filmed as large indeterminate groups) and in the cinematography and editing. Choosing a scene from *Les Hommes nouveaux* (Marcel L’Herbier, 1936) Benali shows how the combination of subject matter and composition of shots, combined with the subsequent editing, emphasises the division between the French colonisers and the colonised Arabs:

Indeed, the “indigenous” space exists for itself, without any link with the occupant’s. The opposite is equally true. That means that these two spaces are filmed with less intention to signify their perfect coexistence than to highlight their difference, indeed their antimony. As a consequence, the effect sought after by such a technique is the definition of each space according to its architectural forms that themselves refer to mental structures. Now what is the result of this distribution? On the one hand, a perfect linearity that supplants all human presence, on the other, irregular forms surrounded by crowds of anonymous characters.

During this same period in Australia, Charles Chauvel, one of the country’s pioneer filmmakers, directed three films that focus on relations between Australia’s Anglo-Saxon settlers and Aborigines. In the first two, *Heritage* (1935) and *Uncivilised* (1936), he justifies the British presence in Australia and highlights the inferiority of the indigenous inhabitants. With *Heritage*, Chauvel has produced what could be classified as a documentary-drama, celebrating “the greatest story of colonisation ever known”. One is led to hypothesise that Chauvel’s research into representing Aborigines was carried out in a cinema watching the Indians in Westerns. The Aborigines in *Heritage* ride horses and ambush white pioneers. William Routt finds that Chauvel’s desire to proselytise about Australia’s potential greatness is so strong that the film is not even coherent within its own fictional terms. Routt calls the second film, *Uncivilised*, the “unholy offspring of Tarzan and Nelson Eddy”. Chauvel has added the stereotypical vision of Africans to construct a bizarre hybrid representation. We see Aborigines again galloping about on horses attacking white settlers, trading in hallucinogenic flies, communicating with smoke signals and holding frantic nocturnal dances in dense jungle to the beat of tom-toms.
Almost twenty years later, however, Chauvel had undergone a remarkable change in his knowledge about Aborigines. *Jedda* (released in 1955, filmed in 1953) is a landmark film both in the history of Australian cinema and for the representation of the indigenous peoples. It is the first Australian film in colour, it is the first film in which Aborigines play major roles, and it is, most importantly, the first film which focusses specifically on the problems Aborigines have in dealing with colonisation. Although the filmmaker is still resolutely colonialist, he has discovered that Aborigines have their own integral cultures.

French and Australian societies since the early 1970s have officially abandoned and discredited social divisions founded on race. Thus we would expect that films released from this period depicting historical colonial settings would challenge and discredit the racial division that separated colonised and coloniser.

**The Problem of Representing the Other**

One of the major problems in postcolonial Western literature and cinema is the appropriate representation of non-Western peoples. Is it possible for a member of one culture to correctly represent another culture of which he or she only has a limited knowledge? This question is part of the greater debate which centres upon the question of how the One, which generally implies the West, can know the Other, that is, the non-West.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, published in 1978, brought the debate of the representation of the Other into prominence. He investigates the problem of representing other cultures through an examination of the way that Western literature over several centuries had developed an image of the East that served ultimately to influence and justify the expansion of its empires. A notable characteristic of this image of the East is that the East itself had little input into it. In an article published in 1989, Said turns his
attention specifically to representations of colonised peoples, where he sees the need to weaken cultural boundaries so that they allow an exchange:

(...) if we think of cultures as permeable and, on the whole, defensive boundaries between polities, a more promising situation appears. Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not least.\(^{12}\)

Said argues further that it is not possible to understand other cultures within the confines of one’s own epistemological tradition. Anthropology reduced other cultures to objects of study and it needed to adopt an interactive approach in order for its findings to be comprehensive. Said’s position can be summarised thus: firstly, on the negative side, he argues that it is not possible to know the Other within one’s own framework of knowledge, and secondly, on the positive side, he perceives that it is more promising to rethink the concept of cultures as inclusive of outside influences instead of exclusive.

Bill Readings’s position is more singular and echoes the negative side postulated by Said. Readings argues that it is impossible to know the Other, that is, another culture. In “Pagans, Perverts and Primitives?” he shows how Werner Herzog’s *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984) does not attempt to represent the Aborigines, but instead, to demonstrate the impossibility of representing them:

The film does not represent an other so much as bear witness to an otherness to representation, a *différend*.\(^{13}\)

Readings challenges the concept of representation itself through evoking the concept of Jean-François Lyotard’s *différend*. This is a hypothetical entity that the French sociologist invented to describe the point at which political frameworks perform a victimisation.\(^{14}\) In Lyotard’s own terms a *différend* is “a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that could not be resolved equitably for lack of a rule applicable to the two modes of argumentation.”\(^{15}\) It is most important to understand that, for Lyotard, a *différend* is not a synonym for any conflict or clash, but rather a conflict or clash between two groups of people whose fundamental belief systems are mutually
incompatible and incomprehensible. The point in Where The Green Ants Dream at which the “immigrant Australian Commonwealth”, as Readings calls it, victimises the indigenous community in this film, is when its particular justice system encounters a completely different way of thinking. The only way around this conflict normally is force, and force by its nature produces a victim. Readings believes that Herzog’s success is that he represents this **différend** between Aboriginal and Australian relations instead of attempting to represent the Aborigines:

> All the film is wagered on the possibility that these are not differences within a representational frame but marks of a **différend** with representation itself.¹⁷

This is achieved primarily by structuring the narrative to highlight incidents that demonstrate the existence of the **différend**. For example, in one scene, the Vice-President of the mining company demands a spokesman from the Aborigines and their response is to produce a group of elders. When he continues to demand a single person, the elders ignore him because this is not a concept held in their culture. A second example shows that Aboriginal and Western conceptualisations of time are incommensurable. A geologist asks an Aborigine how long he has been waiting. The geologist tries to quantify the response of, “A little long while”. The Aborigine replies “yes” to each question in turn of “ten minutes?”, “one hour?” and “yesterday sundown” without differentiation. After further discussing the differences in history and space depicted in Where the Green Ants Dream, Readings stresses that: “whatever it is, the Aborigines’ ‘identity’ is radically inaccessible to us.”¹⁸

E. Ann Kaplan disagrees strongly with Readings’s position in her chapter entitled “Can One know the Other?” in Looking for the Other,¹⁹ arguing that “this leaves people in one culture with no possibility of understanding or having relations with people in a radically different culture”.²⁰ She attempts to illustrate his error by analysing three films by female directors. Her choice of female is deliberate:

> I will argue that women scholars, critics and workers, administrators, teachers, wives and mothers (not to exclude some male scholars, like Dirlik) offer possibilities through knowledges
that male scholars and theorists often ignore. I analyse films by independent women filmmakers in support of the claim for a different way of thinking through and imagining problems of nation, global relations, imperialism.21

Within the context of Kaplan’s feminist political agenda (The subtitle of Looking for the Other is “Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze”), she demonstrates how the three female directors offer ways of understanding other cultures. In Chocolat, she highlights the manner in which Denis gives Protée “the look”.22 Denis explains her technique of very simply allowing a shot of Protée to linger on his face after he is involved in a confrontation with a white person so that the viewer witnesses his reaction:

I wanted to relate day-to-day colonial life. Since there was not much said between Blacks and Whites, there wasn’t any possibility of communicating through words. The visual images had to explain relationships. I think that one camera shot can reveal a lot if it lasts long enough.23

But this is a tenuous example. It is certainly true that this technique broadens the viewer’s perspective to include Protée’s subjective experience. But although we witness his facial expressions and may guess the feelings that produce them, this is as far as we can go. We do not get to know him. We can establish that he is uncomfortable with his situation but he does not articulate whether his discomfort springs from personal or political motives. Chocolat seems closer to Bill Readings’s conclusion about Where the Green Ants Dream, in that we see a representation of the impossibility of representing Protée.

Kaplan takes a similar position to Said in a later article, published separately as a result of a visit to Australia and meeting with some Aboriginal people:

We need to contribute to the decentering of Western culture, and it helps for us to focus on other cultures. Our own paradigms are further opened up, changed in beneficial ways, through the challenges that other cultures offer.24

Said and Kaplan both believe that understanding the Other is possible and necessary. One needs to be prepared to exchange elements of one’s own representative framework for elements of the culture that one wishes to understand. The topic of representing the Other is obviously very complex and unresolved. Readings’s argument that it is not possible to know the Other is on the surface too extreme, but this does not exclude it
entirely. Kaplan in her text also criticises Readings for choosing an extreme example.
We would add that the degree of difference between cultures would have to affect their mutual capacity to understand each other. European cultures or Aboriginal cultures, among themselves, would arguably have less trouble dealing with their respective differences than in any encounter between Europeans and Aborigines.

Readings’s choice of Where the Green Ants Dream to illustrate his argument is however problematic in another way. Contrary to what he argues, the film does represent elements of the Aboriginal community’s culture in the film. One of these elements is not true, and that is the ability of the elders to disrupt electro-magnetic fields. There is a scene also, when an elevator is unable to operate while the elders are inside it. This misrepresentation of Aborigines by endowing them with unexplained magical powers that in reality they do not have does little to help Westerners to understand this very different culture. Where The Green Ants Dream is not the sole example of making up things about Aboriginal cultures. Peter Weir is also guilty of misrepresenting Aboriginal culture in his contemporary film, The Last Wave, released in 1977, when he endows the tribal elders with impossible magical powers. Just because another culture has practices and beliefs that are completely incomprehensible to Europeans does not mean that they can make up something else to act as a substitute. Even if the Aborigines did have supernatural powers resulting from their close affinity with nature, they would not necessarily match European expectations of what constitutes supernatural powers.

In the course of this chapter, we will take up the more positive arguments by attempting to identify examples of exchange taking place in the films. Perhaps one of the most obvious indicators of mutual exchange is not in the textual apparatus of a film itself, but in its production. Do the credits show signs of indigenous people being consulted about their representation in the film? An example of indigenous
consultation is in Phillip Noyce’s Backroads (1977), a film with a contemporary story centered on white/black relations in outback Australia, and thematically aligned therefore to Where the Green Ants Dream. During the production, Noyce encouraged the artistic input of the main Aboriginal actor in the film, Gary Foley, to ensure an authentic representation of Aboriginal culture. This did not guarantee positive recognition from Aboriginal audiences. However, Marcia Langton is quite supportive about those scenes in the film showing Aboriginal characters drunk and regrets that these scenes have caused other Aboriginal viewers to cringe.

As well as looking for signs of authentic representations of the Other, we also need to look for the elements which distort and provide a false image of the culture that is foreign to its filmmaker and spectators. We have discussed two of these above, racism and misrepresentation. To these we can add a third, exoticism. Todorov describes exoticism as a “country and a culture defined exclusively by their relation to the observer”. He contrasts and then links exoticism with nationalism:

If I am a nationalist, I proclaim that the values of my own country, whatever they may be, are superior to all others. No, the exoticist replies, the country with superior values is a country whose only relevant characteristic is that it is not my own. Thus, in both cases what is at issue is a relativism overtaken at the last minute by a value judgment (we are better than the others; the others are better than we are), but in which the definition of the entities compared, “ourselves” and “the others”, remains purely relative.

The key point about nationalism and exoticism is that they both misrepresent the other culture in order to justify their value judgments. In other words, nationalists (of whom racists are the extreme form) and exoticists (of whom those who misrepresent are a form) begin at square one with a judgment of the Other based on limited observation, and replace an authentic image of the Other with one they have manufactured themselves according to these preconceptions. Thus we have both positive and negative distorting of other cultures. Armed with the concepts thrown up by these theoretical debates, we will examine some key films.
The Representation of Indigenous Communities

The screen time allotted to indigenous communities in the films of our corpus is relatively low. In two Australian films, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Manganinnie*, the narratives focus on indigenous characters, but we still see relatively little of the communities from which they come. In one French film, *Rue Cases-Nègres*, (Euzhan Palcy, 1983) the narrative focusses exclusively on a black community in Martinique.

This relatively short screen time has the obvious effect of reducing the prominence given to indigenous characters and communities. Therefore the quality of the representation becomes more crucial, as these minimal fragmented images construct the overall image of indigenous peoples for a white audience. We see representations of indigenous communities more commonly in the French films than in the Australian ones. This is possibly due to the demographic fact that the indigenous populations in the French colonies were always greater in number than the French settlers. In Australia, the white settlers overtook the native population quite rapidly. Between the arrival of the First Fleet in January 1788 and the first census in 1901, the settler population had grown from zero to 3,773,801, against a mere estimated 67,000 Aborigines. This may also account for the fact that five Australian films in the corpus include a sole Aboriginal character, a kind of last survivor - *Walkabout* (1970), *Journey Among Women* (1977), *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976) *Manganinnie* (1980) and *Robbery Under Arms*(1985).

We will examine scenes from two films which represent indigenous communities prominently during the course of their narratives, *We of the Never Never* (Igor Auzins, 1982) and *La Victoire en chantant* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1976). The films are chosen for their obviously conscious attempts to endow the indigenous
characters with a subjective presence. We will then discuss the special case of Rue Cases-Nègres.

Nearly three-quarters of the way through We of the Never Never, the English-speaking spectator is twice given the opportunity to understand Aboriginal dialogue in the form of sub-titles. At this point in the film, Jeannie Gunn has finally received her trunks of belongings after a wait of around six months. She has furnished the cattle station homestead with chairs, pictures, ornaments and drapes. Her husband, Aeneas, has to depart on a search for a herd of wild horses. After he leaves, we see a shot of Jeannie in an elaborate wicker chair surrounded by her newly recreated environment. She looks very alone. She walks outside onto the verandah, obviously bored. Outside are two elderly Aboriginal workers. They exchange the following dialogue in their own language, the subtitles translating it:

(First Aborigine) “Damn funny people, eh?”
(Second Aborigine) “Yeah...work like mad for her - then clear out.”
(They laugh loudly.)

The second piece of sub-titled dialogue appears five minutes later. A roving stockman from Queensland has died from fever and Aeneas Gunn is conducting a burial ceremony. The coffin is in the ground. Two different Aborigines, much younger, are puzzled:

(First Aborigine) “Why put him in the ground?”
(Second Aborigine) “Maybe they think spirits will take him. Then next time he’ll come back as a blackfella.”

In a two-hour film, with Aborigines frequently speaking both in their own language and in English, and conversely with Aeneas also speaking a few times in their language, these are the only dialogues translated. They nevertheless have a reasonably strong qualitative impact. Without them, limited to four lines even, we would have no perspective at all of the Aborigines’ opinion of their situation on the station. The first exchange is important in that not only does it draw attention to the way Aborigines find
European culture strange, but it debunks the myth that they are lazy. They have been watching Jeannie sitting around doing nothing, and they view such inactivity negatively. The second exchange is also important, as it highlights the consciousness the Aboriginal speaker has of his inferior position from the perspective of Europeans. His explanation that whites bury their dead so that they do not reincarnate as “blackfellas” also illustrates the cynical humour with which Aborigines cope with this enforced inferiority.31

The same technique is used in La Victoire en chantant. Around thirteen minutes into the film, the two priests in white full-length robes and white, wide-rimmed hats go to visit a village church. They do not walk however, nor ride horses nor take a carriage nor a cart. Rather, they are carried in roughly made sedan chairs, and of course the porters are Africans. We cannot be sure if sedan chairs were out of use in this region by 1915, but their appearance provides an opportunity both to highlight the absurd lengths to which colonisers would go just to impose their superiority, and to find out what the Africans thought about it. Annaud uses sub-titles to translate some lines from their songs as they carry their masters:

My White Man is big and fat,
He is as heavy as an ox.
Strange White Men!
Strange White Men!
Your White Man is big and fat,
Mine has smelly feet.32

The remark “Strange White Men”, like its equivalent in We of the Never Never, “Damn funny people, eh?”, has the effect of both endowing the indigenous characters with a subjective voice and also reversing the notion of the Other. Suddenly the white spectator is being confronted with the idea that his culture appears just as strange to others as theirs does to him. At the philosophical level, this is also a challenge to the very Enlightenment tradition, which as we have already mentioned in the Introduction, views Western civilisation as being not different in kind but in degree, as being the
epitome of a unilinear progress. The dialogues from these two films, brief though they are, reveal that the so-called “primitives” have no such notion of Westerners being advanced at all. This particular perspective is entirely in the Westerners’ minds. The Aborigines of We of the Never Never and the Ivory Coast Africans of La Victoire en chantant simply perceive Westerners as incomprehensively different.

In both these two films, the representation of the indigenous communities is important. In We of the Never Never, the Aborigines live in a group of roughly assembled huts close to the main homestead. The men are employed as stockmen, looking after cattle and horses. The Aborigines are therefore not living any form of traditional lifestyle. They manage to retain as many of their traditions as possible, such as dance and storytelling, but they have been dispossessed of their land. Nevertheless, in one scene, one of the elders, called “Goggle-Eye” by the whites, shows that his people take every opportunity available to resist colonisation. Aeneas, the manager of the station, wants to find the Aborigines from another tribe who have been killing his cattle. He takes Goggle-Eye and several stockmen on a journey to search for the culprits and at one point they need to find water. Goggle-Eye refuses to tell Aeneas where the nearest waterhole is, saying it is for blacks only. Aeneas insists that he be told where it is, because the land and its waterholes belong to the station. Goggle-Eye’s reply is simply: “Too right, boss. You own it, you find it.” This is one of many scenes in We of the Never Never that counterbalance the negative image of the horrendous conditions that the blacks live in by showing examples where they nevertheless retain their dignity. Another example is the scene where an Aboriginal stockman explains the origin of his people to Jeannie. Such scenes remind the spectator that the Aborigines are not living in these shabby conditions and wearing worn-out Western clothing because they are decadent and have no culture of their own, but because they have suffered the loss of the foundation on which their rich culture was based, the land.
In contrast with this image of indigenous people living in makeshift conditions with their social bonds fragmented and their intimate association with the land severed, the African communities in *La Victoire en chantant* remain within their original organisation. The white French settlers living in a separate enclave seem to have had little impact on the inhabitants of the villages composed of mud huts with straw roofs. Except for a few who have been recruited as servants, the remainder of the villagers appear to follow a traditional lifestyle. Where there is a strong outside influence, it is not Western but Eastern: Islam. In one scene early in the film, we see the indigenous Catholic representative outside his little church, kneeling on his prayer mat praying to Allah. When he hears the singing that signals the imminent arrival of the two white priests on their sedan chairs, he quickly rolls up his mat, races inside the church and emerges a few seconds later wearing a cross around his neck and signing the cross over his chest. It is immediately evident that the indigenous man does not take his colonisers’ religion very seriously at all. His ability to fool his supposed superiors makes a mockery of them.

The element in the film that disrupts this *status quo* in the Africans’ lives is World War One. The colonial army recruits African men from the village to attack the Germans in the neighbouring territory. French soldiers forcefully round up the indigenous men, enrol them, and give them guns. These men are sent out to fight without training while the whites have a picnic. The black soldiers return shortly after injured and, hence, useless for further combat.

An important sequence which highlights the representation of Africans in this film is when the geographer Fresnois, who has taken charge of the military operation, visits the village chief in his hut to demand a hundred more men. This sequence is interesting for the use of the words “sauvages” [savages] and “indigènes” [indigenous people]. The chief does want to offer Fresnois any more of his own villagers because he
has already lost his best men in the botched attack on the Germans. He agrees instead to Fresnois’s suggestion to capture a hundred “savages” from the savanna:

I can capture a lot of these savages. They are very numerous, very robust and very stupid. The people of my village have never liked the people of the savanna.34

The chief’s use of a derogatory term to describe a different culture reveals that the white-black power hierarchy is not the only one that exists. For the Western spectator, this insight into the plurality of African cultures challenges the falsely uniform concept of “African culture”. None of the Australian films in the corpus differentiate between Aborigines in such a way. Indeed, the homogenisation of Aboriginal culture is reinforced by the use of the same actors to play roles in very different geographical locations. Mawuyal Yanthalawuy plays Rose in We of the Never Never and also the title role in Manganinnie. She is therefore playing both an Aborigine from Tasmania and an Aborigine from tropical Northern Territory. David Gulpilil, whose first role was the Aboriginal boy in Walkabout, became contemporary Australian cinema’s representative Aborigine. He plays Aborigines in locations as far flung as South Australia (Storm Boy, Henri Safran, 1976) and the Northern Territory (Crocodile Dundee, Peter Faiman, 1986). Charles Chauvel’s Jedda (1955) is possibly the only feature film in Australian history which differentiates between Aboriginal cultures. Marbuk, the Aboriginal rebel who abducts Jedda from her white adoptive parents, is not from her tribe. His own tribal elders point the death bone at him when he returns with the girl, because she is of the wrong “skin”. It is to Chauvel’s credit that he not only included this in the film, but made it play a major causal role in the film’s resolution.

To be culturally inclusive is not, however, the main point being made in La Victoire en chantant. The incident also reveals the universal issue of racism and the corrupting influence of the commerce in human beings. As the village chief only supplies Fresnois with twenty “savages”, the white man returns to the village, intent on getting the balance from the chief’s own men. The chief had received him as an
honoured guest inside his hut for the first visit, but the second visit notably takes place outside it. The chief explains that his men do not know where to find any more “natives” and the captives themselves will not help. Fresnois’s response is: “Can’t they make them talk?” The chief is incensed at such a suggestion. He replies with great emotion that his men are incapable of forcing the captives to talk, and that such attempts would damage them (“les abîmer”). The chief is thus displaying a sharp commercial awareness of the value of his goods and also the fact that he is more than a match for the colonial intruder.

The examples from *We of the Never Never* and *La Victoire en chantant* show some of the fictional mechanisms used in postcolonial films to challenge racism and attempt to break the simplistic and monopolistic vision of colonised cultures as inferior. Sequences such as the one we have just discussed go a long way in highlighting the fact that the cultures formerly considered as the hapless prey of the white coloniser have adopted sophisticated strategies to ensure their survival.

*Rue Cases-Nègres* is different in many ways from these and other films in the corpus. Martinique is an overseas French department - what the French call a “DOM” - and so all of its inhabitants are officially French citizens, but only a minority are of geographical French origin. The majority of the population are descendants of the African slaves who were brought to work the sugar plantations from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. They are not indigenous, therefore. When the French began settling Martinique in the 1630s, they killed or chased off the previous inhabitants, the Caraïbes, who were originally from the Amazon.

The film won two Silver Lions at the 1983 Venice Film Festival, for Best Film and Best Actress. It attracted more Martiniquans to the cinema than any other film in the island’s history. It has also been the subject of over a dozen articles and a monograph. In support of its representation of the blacks, Alain Ménil writes:
We recognised ourselves then as never before. But what does it mean to “recognise oneself” at
the cinema? This recognition may in fact mean either that the proposed self-image is
appropriate for its referent (with all the risks run in the referentialist illusion), or that this image
is the one that we project ourselves, an ideal image where the Ego only apprehends itself
through this Ideal Ego, in a faithfully deformed mirror. What have we recognised then, a
“reality” transcribed with precision, or what remains of it, on account of all the deformations
that our collective imagination has imposed on its referent, so far as to reformulate it into an
ideal? It is all that at once, and this film cleverly makes use of it, blending a certain objectivity
into the nostalgic halo, where this sepia colour leads us all the more surely.

This notion of the audience recognising themselves in film characters is no doubt as
complex as it is essential in the successful reception of a film. What is important is to
know that the black Martiniquans did recognise themselves in Rue Cases-Nègres. It is
strong evidence that the representation of the black community in Martinique
corresponds to how the actual community does perceive and conceive itself.

The film is directed by a female black Martiniquan, and the story has been
adapted from a novel by Joseph Zobel, also of African origins. It shows the reality of
life in the 1930s for the blacks who, after slavery was abolished, were still obliged to
work in the plantations for poverty level wages in order to survive. The title of the film
comes from the fact that the houses that form a single street alongside the canefields are
nothing but shacks - cases. The first half of the film is centred exclusively around this
street and its little sheet-iron single-room dwellings.

José is the main character, and he lives with his grandmother. Inside her shack,
she keeps her meagre possessions and food stores. In an early scene, when all the
children are on holidays from school, they invade José’s house. One of them knocks a
vase off the table. José attempts to hide the breakage from his Ma by simply putting the
pieces back together. On the surface it looks still to be in one piece. But when she
scarcely grazes the vase and it collapses, Ma knows that it was already broken. She
beats José not only for allowing it to be broken, but also for trying to hide it from her.
The vase really becomes a symbol of the old woman’s extreme poverty. In a white
household, it would be a very ordinary ornament among many much more splendid. To
Ma, it is perhaps her only link with beauty.
Ma, like all the adults on Rue Cases-Nègres, works in the cane fields all day every day, for very little money. On payday, we hear of the tiny sums that they took all week to earn: 12 francs for Ma, 15 for another worker, 18 for yet another. One of the workers has to support a family and his wife protests to the white paymaster, complete in white suit and white pith helmet, that she will not be able to support her family on what he has just paid her husband. The protest is met with complete indifference.

Out of all the workers in the fields, it is the oldest one that best shows what a life of hard labour in the tropical sun brings. Monsieur Médouze is so old that he can remember when slavery was abolished. According to M. Médouze, his father had been taken from Africa along with many others to work in the cane fields, and all he wanted to do was to die so his spirit could return to Africa. The actor who plays the old man does so in such a way that the viewer can sense the aching and the entrenched sadness, relieved only by this one hope of returning to his homeland.

What is particularly interesting in Rue Cases-Nègres is the variety of characters. Almost all of them are black and they are by no means uniform or caricatures. Neither are they used to politicise or eulogise their situation and culture. Some have long surrendered to their impoverished lifestyle such as Monsieur Médouze. Others, like Ma, have understood that as a black working in the cane fields, she has no power to change her own life, but she is determined to change that of her grandson, José. At least three of the black characters are trying to integrate themselves into white society with the eventual aim of forgetting their black heritage. One of these characters has married a rich white man, Monsieur de Thorail and lives in a large colonial villa. To reinforce her fantasy that she no longer belongs to the black community, she tries continually to prevent her son, Léopold, from playing with the other black children from school. When she receives a record in the mail from Paris, she plays it reverently to Léopold, pretending that she is nostalgic for Paris. But even though she has married
a white man, she learns that he has never considered his wife anything other than a black. As the husband lies dying on his bed, as a result of being kicked by a horse, she begs him to give their son his surname. He refuses, telling her that he could never give such an honourable French name - de Thorail - to a half-caste child.

José, the main character, is also the only member of the black community who has any real hope of escaping the usual dismal fate of a black Martiniquan worker. He excels at all his academic studies at school, and wins a part-scholarship to a college in Fort-de-France, the main city of Martinique. Despite numerous obstacles, with the stubborn support of Ma he eventually wins a full scholarship. His destiny is perhaps to be a teacher and hence to go far from the exploitation suffered by his grandmother and the rest of the inhabitants of the Rue Cases-Nègres.

But, while Rue Cases-Nègres is different from We of the Never-Never and La Victoire en chantant in being directed by a French citizen of African origin, and having main characters who are black, it seems to value white culture more highly than the other two films. The story in Rue Cases-Nègres is not about the blacks attempting to reclaim or revalue their transposed culture. The only character who does attempt this, Monsieur Médouze, is represented as old and worn-out, and finally dies. The main character, José, is the exact opposite. He is young and dynamic, but what is he working so hard to achieve? Good marks in the French education system so that he can best integrate into Western society and leave behind Rue Cases-Nègres and everything it represents.
The Go-Between

In this section we investigate the narrative sites at which the colonised and colonising cultures intersect and determine what values are proclaimed at this level by the filmmakers. In the previous chapter, we examined interracial relationships and found that they do not have happy endings, suggesting that the filmmakers do not share the optimism of theorists like Edward Said and E. Ann Kaplan. In this section, we approach the films from the sociological viewpoint and examine the type of individual characters chosen to act as links between the colonising and the colonised cultures. As with the interracial relationships, we will look at the implications of a negative or positive outcome. We will also ask if the characters challenge the status quo of the colonial order, and importantly for the future perspective on postcolonial intercultural relations, if there exist any signs of the cultures beginning to know each other, or at least respect each other’s difference.

Kevin Brown introduces the concept of the “go-between” in his study of race relations in fifteen Australian films with Aboriginal characters. His definition of the “go-between” is:

(...) the character who most centrally embodies the competing pulls of European society/culture and Aboriginal society/culture. 38

One of the defining characteristics of the Go-Between is that it is the primary mediatory link between two cultures. The defining nature of this mediating role obviously permits us to determine filmmakers’ attitudes about the potential of multicultural relations. Failure and defeat for the Go-Between would tend to support Bill Readings’s argument that the Other is fundamentally unknowable. If the Go-Between succeeds, then the filmmaker can be aligned to Said’s and Kaplan’s optimism. We also need to take account of whether the Go-Between is indigenous or European. Can the failure or success of this figure at engaging with the other culture be attributed to racial identity?
Brown finds that it does: in the films that he examines, the Aboriginal Go-Betweens are always defeated, usually by death. The message there is that Aboriginal people cannot live in white society. On the other hand, the white Go-Betweens adapt easily to Aboriginal customs before returning safely to their own culture.  

Brown also identifies the characters who most centrally embody either the European culture or the Aboriginal culture. For instance, in We of the Never Never, he lists Jeannie as the Go-Between, her husband as the embodiment of European culture and Bett-Bett, the little black girl as the embodiment of Aboriginal culture. Jeannie expresses a desire to learn from the Aborigines, she goes swimming with the women in the waterhole, and she correspondingly makes an effort to teach them her own culture, rather than merely impose it on them. Brown finds that although Jeannie has the advantage of approaching the Aborigines from a position of power, she makes a metaphorical journey towards Aboriginal culture:

Here, the message is that some intelligent and sensitive Europeans can make an individual journey towards Aboriginal society/culture.  

At the surface level this film is exemplary in showing a European challenging the conventional racist attitude and making a sustained effort at getting to know the other culture. However, Brown is looking for signs of racism at a much deeper level and of a more subtle nature. He qualifies his initial positive reading of We of the Never Never by pointing out some characteristics that contribute to perpetuating racism. Firstly, the historical setting of the film risks distancing the overt displays of racism by the stockmen portrayed in it as belonging to the past. The non-urban setting can also work to distance the racism from urban audiences (Australia has an urban population of around 85%), and thus reassure these viewers that they are not guilty of it. This sort of argument condemns in advance all of the films in our corpus as undermining the anti-racist message they are attempting to convey.
This is indeed Brown’s conclusion. In his analysis of *Walkabout*, *Eliza Fraser*, *Mad Dog Morgan*, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Manganinnie*, his findings are similar to those relative to *We of the Never Never*, namely that the positive surface portrayals must ultimately be betrayed by the distancing effect of history or a remote geographical setting. To test Brown’s findings, we will apply his analysis to the French films in order to determine if similar patterns are apparent. In the four French films with identifiable Go-Betweens, all are European. There is no French film which focusses on the efforts of an indigenous character to assimilate or integrate into colonial society. The closest candidate for an indigenous Go-Between would be Protée in *Chocolat*, but he does not have intimate access to those characters who embody European culture, Marc or Aimée Dalens. A second European character in *Chocolat* who is a good candidate for a Go-Between is Luc. As we have already mentioned, he acts as a catalyst in exposing the undercurrent of unspoken tension and resentment that exists in the Dalens’s colonial household. However, France is the central character who embodies the interracial relationship. As a little girl, she issues orders to Protée because she has been taught to, yet at the same time, she feels uncomfortable because a part of her wishes to be a friend on equal terms. We see several examples of this desire: the opening shot of the historical episode when she shares an ant sandwich with Protée, the shot of the two just sitting and gazing into the distance at the plain that leads up to the hill, to mention just two of them.

In *Fort Saganne* (Alain Corneau, 1984), the Saganne character played by Gérard Depardieu manages to establish a lasting friendship on equal terms with Amajar, the Berber leader of fifty warriors. In a major battle against another Berber leader, Omar, who opposes the French presence, Amajar is so badly wounded that his leg becomes gangrenous. It must either be cut off or he will die, and the job is given to Lieutenant Saganne. The French officer removes the leg successfully despite having no medical
training, and saves his Berber friend. But the key dramatic incident that reinforces this friendship can also be seen as reinforcing the colonialist view that the natives need the Europeans, and that the French prefer to see themselves as saviours rather than conquerors. One is reminded of Jules Ferry’s words when he defends the presence of France and England in equatorial Africa:

Is it possible to deny that it is a piece of good fortune for these unfortunate populations of Equatorial Africa to fall under the protection of the French or the English nations? 41

In Indochine, Eliane is the central connecting link to Indochinese culture through her adoption of the orphaned Annamite princess, Camille. Eliane uses her position of power to convert Camille almost completely to French culture, which includes having a French Christian name. The breakdown of Eliane’s relationship with Camille embodies the split between France and Indochina. Eliane wants to continue to influence Camille’s life after the girl is released from prison, but like Indochina the country, the only way Camille can obtain her independence is through conflict. The adoptive mother does not give up the child under her protection willingly. A secondary Go-Between in Indochine is Jean-Baptiste, the father of Camille’s child. He dissolves the normal division between coloniser and colonised by the fact that he deserts from the military to save Camille from slavery.

In Eliane’s contacts with other indigenous people, it is revealing to note how her conduct varies according to their status. She treats Tanh’s mother as a friend, whose large, luxurious house signals the Indochinese woman’s membership of the ruling class. At a traditional celebration held by the Mandarin, Eliane greets the local ruler according to indigenous custom. But in these two cases, this treatment is entirely founded on power relations. Contrast her respect for elite Indochinese people with the treatment she gives one of her plantation workers. She beats a worker for running away as though he were an errant child. She appears to regard the rest of her workers as only an indeterminate mass, with no value beyond their function.
We have already shown how the relationship between Jean-François de la Plaine and Amélie in *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* serves to reinforce the belief that France has seduced her colonised peoples rather than conquered them. This is also not far from the idea of France being their saviour as in *Fort Saganne*. But, like *Chocolat* and *Indochine*, a secondary character seems to have the stronger link with the colonised culture - Commandant de Blanet, played by Richard Bohringer. He has married an African woman and has children by her, and has no intention of returning to France.

The outcomes in all of these four films is that the Go-Between’s linking role between the two cultures breaks down; the separation that occurs is almost always by the death of a protagonist, meaning at the symbolic level that the cultural separation is permanent. In *Chocolat*, Protée leaves, thus severing the relationship with France. When France returns as an adult, William the African-American also rejects her efforts to establish a friendship. In *Fort Saganne*, Charles Saganne returns to Europe and is killed in the Great War. He is able to win battles against the Berbers but not against other Europeans, it seems. In *Indochine*, even before Eliane goes to Switzerland, the break occurs between her and Camille. Jean-Baptiste dies, thus severing his own link with the Annamite princess revolutionary. In *Les Caprices d’un fleuve*, Amélie dies in childbirth. But it is also true in these two latter films that the separation is not absolute. The European parent retains in both cases the hybrid child. This is an ambiguous resolution, and could be interpreted as symbolising the postcolonial control that the European powers have retained over their former colonies, which are, generally speaking, hybrids of traditional and Western cultures.

None of the principal Go-Between characters really challenge the colonial order. By definition they straddle the dividing lines, especially the girl France in *Chocolat*, who innocently spends a lot of time in Protée’s company. Ultimately though, this reinforces the Western image of Africans as culturally infantile. If France had been an
adult, a relationship with Protée would not have met with approval. But the less important character of Luc Segalen indeed does cross the boundaries between coloniser and colonised. Luc’s actions cause considerable stress to Marc and Protée, the respective representatives of European and indigenous culture. But in the end, it is not Marc who throws him out, but Protée, as we have already seen. In Indochine, Eliane certainly guards her position of colonial privilege. As in Chocolat, it is the less important Go-Between who challenges the racial divide, Jean-Baptiste. The naval officer undergoes a substantial transformation in this film. At first, he is happy to exercise his power to burn a river boat and teach the local Indochinese a lesson about who is in control. But his experience on Dragon Island with the slave market repulses him. Seeing Camille among the captives was enough to catapult him into the indigenous cause. In Fort Saganne and in Les Caprices d’un fleuve, there seems to be no sustained challenges to the colonial order. Charles’s friendship with Amajar in no way threatens his belief in the value of French occupation. It would have been quite the reverse if Charles had instead befriended Omar, who led the revolt against the French. The rooftop cellist, played by Hippolyte Girardot, who asks: “Servir la France? Mais c’est qui, la France?” [Serve France? Who’s France?], is mad and commits suicide. The inclusion of his character in the film seems to be principally in order to highlight the fact that only the deranged would ask such questions. In Les Caprices d’un fleuve, even Commandant de Blanet obeys his orders. He is a willing participant in the colonial order, in spite of his marriage to an African woman. Anne, the rich female African slavetrader who is a possible indigenous Go-Between, (who identifies explicitly as a half-caste), has done nothing but exploit the colonial system to her own advantage.

We also sought indicators of cultural exchange, examples or traces of the One getting to know the Other. All the clues so far indicate that filmmakers are disinclined to believe that intercultural knowledge is possible. There are occasional minor
exchanges, as if the filmmakers are experimenting with the notion, but they have all failed to culminate in any real influence by the end of the film. Luc Segalen’s efforts to work and live with the blacks in *Chocolat* lead to his expulsion. France in the same film, even after the time she spent with Protée during her childhood, returns as an adult to find she has nothing in common with the Cameroon people. Charles Saganne shows signs of influence from his time in the Sahara, not of traditional Berber life, but of the Islamic religion they follow. As he leads his soldiers into battle against the Germans, he shouts a call to Allah. But he is fated to die in hospital. Earlier in the film, during the battle against Omar, one of his soldiers says: “Will we get to know an Arab? No.” [Est-ce que nous en venons à connaître un Arabe? Non.]. This film leaves the Other unknowable. In *Indochine*, the only sign of Eliane participating in indigenous customs is her opium-smoking habit. This appears to have less to do with any desire to know the Other than to escape from her own private problems.

Despite the questionable union of a middle-aged white male with an adolescent slave girl, *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* nevertheless offers the most positive outcome among the French films as far as opening possibilities for knowing the Other. Jean-François elects to return to Cap St Louis rather than to stay in France. Although the story ends at that point, and we will never know his fate, there are signs during the course of the film that the Frenchman has been slowly becoming more open to the influence of African culture. This is primarily done through his growing appreciation of the indigenous people’s music, and also in the scene where he tells Amélie that she looks better in a traditional outfit than the lavish white ball-gown. A possible model for Jean-François’s future is the Commandant de Blanet. As we mentioned earlier, within the confines of the film the Commandant shows no sign of African influence. But the Commandant is a secondary character, so we do not get to know him completely. He surely is far more acculturated into African life than the film permits us to see, or he
would be like any other white colonial officer, and only use the indigenous girls for sex. The marriage suggests an equal respect for his wife’s culture and genuine love for her. In this context, because Jean-François stays in Africa, and does not die, the film is much more positive.

The most striking result of this examination is that in three of the four French films displaying the most direct and sustained interaction between colonising and colonised societies, it is the secondary characters who are the most direct Go-Betweens - Luc Dalens, Jean-Baptiste, Commandant de Blanet. It is they who show the signs of interest in knowing the indigenous culture and if there is challenge to the colonial status quo, it is they who do this. The main characters who can be classified as Go-Betweens remain distant from their colonised neighbours. It is with these characters that the audience will identify, not with the secondary ones. This suggests that filmmakers feel that audiences, the postcolonial heirs to the colonial past, in turn do not have the capacity to interact directly with very different cultures. It appears that the preference for European Go-Betweens (in both the Australian and French films), and the absence of even one indigenous Go-Between, indicates that racism, and the lack of interest in knowing other cultures operates at the subtle level of the narrative structure. 43

From this extension of Brown’s analysis of the Go-Between, one can see the same pattern of permanent separation occurring throughout the French films. There is no need to consider Brown’s ultimate concern that historical settings and remote locations distance viewers in any case: French directors who take on the theme of the colonial past, like their Australian counterparts, do not represent lasting interracial relationships between their main characters. The filmmakers, by doing this, reveal that they do not share the optimism of Edward Said and E. Ann Kaplan that other cultures are knowable. The permanent separations in interracial relationships indicate that like Bill Readings, they believe the Other is fundamentally unknowable.
Privilege and Power: the Whites

As we have seen, the representation of European communities dominates the films by an overwhelming majority. These colonial communities are peopled with the ordinary, mediocre citizens described by Albert Memmi:

It is the mediocre citizens who set the general tone of the colony. They are the true partners of the colonised, for it is the mediocre who are most in need of compensation and of colonial life. (...) Even if every colonialist is not mediocre, every coloniser must, in a certain measure, accept the mediocrity of colonial life and the men who thrive on it. 44

Mediocre though the colonising communities appear, they nevertheless maintain a power base that enables them to live separately from the indigenous peoples, and in a situation of privilege.

How do the films represent the mechanisms that structure the white communities and permit the continuity of their superior status?

The broad range of white characters in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith are representative of the mechanisms of colonial power and privilege. The Reverend Neville is the missionary who attempts to convert the Aborigines from their pagan beliefs and lifestyles to Christianity. He does this on an Aboriginal reserve, called a “mission” to denote its participation in this conversion process. The “mission blacks” as Sergeant Farrell calls the Aborigines living there, are forced to wear Western clothing, take on Western names and live in a settled lifestyle. Reverend Neville’s most focussed effort in his missionary activity is to adopt an Aboriginal child, Jimmie, and bring him up as a white child. The core purpose of the film is to reveal the failure of this project. Reverend Neville is shown to be aware of the futility of his task. Early in the film, we see him reading the “situations vacant” section of a church newsletter, a clear sign that he wants to leave.
With the exception of one short scene in which the minister and his wife react to Jimmie’s murders, the character of Reverend Neville is only present at the very beginning and at the very end. His character has little presence in the body of the film. In other words, the representative of Christianity is absent during the film while evil is being committed. This corresponds both to a personal failing on Reverend Neville’s part and to an institutional one on behalf of the church he represents.

His double failure – to Jimmie and to society – is a telling symptom that colonial society itself had abandoned the Christian ethics on which it was supposedly founded. This is what the film really exposes: that colonial society is inherently un-Christian. We are given systematic examples of open racism. The first example is given by the Irish landholder who employs Jimmie to build fences to mark his boundary. His racism and his ambivalent attitude towards the Christianity that underpins his status as civilised are made quite explicit. He says to Jimmie at the start of their contract:

**Irishman:** Do you have any religion other than nigger?

**Jimmie:** Methodist, boss.

**Irishman:** Then I’ll give you my Christian promise I’ll cut your bloody black balls off if you mess this job. Any post that’s out by more than an inch will cost you a shilling.

The Irishman’s racism is fundamentally un-Christian: it contradicts the dictate that “all men are equal in the eyes of God”. This display of racism is repeated when the Irishman deliberately cheats Jimmie, because Jimmie does not make an error. The Irishman’s prejudiced racist image of him is shown to be false and he is unable to tolerate facing this fact.

The two other examples of the absence of Christianity in the landowners are shown with the Scottish landowner and finally, Mr Newby. The Scottish landowner also sacks Jimmie unfairly because of Jimmie’s brother Mort’s arrival. He does not want another Aborigine on his property. In parentheses, both the Irish and Scottish
landowners are all the more hypocritical in their treatment of Jimmie given their own histories as victims of English expansionism back in the British Isles. It is however the English landowner, Mr Newby, who drives Jimmie to the level of despair that ends in him becoming a murderer. Mr Newby’s household is the epitome of superficial Christian values. He and his sons are models of the Protestant work ethic, shown in the scene just before the massacre where they work late at night to bag grain. They play cricket and the women and girls dress impeccably according to Victorian fashion.

In these three minor landowners, we see explicit examples of the cohabitation of mediocrity and privilege within the colonial institution. One can surmise that none of them would have owned land back in Great Britain. They can only enter the propertied class through moving to Australia, and they can only have this land at the expense of its previous owners, the indigenous people. Despite their professed Christianity, however, they seem nevertheless insensitive to the price of their occupation to the indigenous people. Memmi observes:

> Having found profit either by choice or by chance, the colonizer has nevertheless not yet become aware of the historic role which will be his. He is lacking one step in understanding his new status; he must also understand the origin and significance of this profit. Actually, this is not long in coming. For how long could he fail to see the misery of the colonised and the relation of that misery to his own comfort? He realises that this easy profit is so great because it is wrested from others. In short, he finds two things in one: he discovers the existence of the colonizer as he discovers his privilege.45

These colonists are in fact very much aware of their ursurping role, which shows even further the falseness of their claim to be Christians. When Mort arrives, he and Jimmie are chased from the Scotsman’s property; later, when Mort and an uncle remain on Mr Newby’s property, the good farmer cuts off Jimmie’s groceries. Both men fear the return of the former owners from whom their land had been taken. They do not appear confident in the permanence of their new privilege and they do not want to risk it being taken away. Thus they are, at least at a subconscious level, aware of the suffering of the indigenous population and by allowing it to continue, demonstrate their total alienation from the Christian values that they claim to have.
So if God is absent from the colony, if it is therefore not God who is responsible for the colonists’ favourable situation, how have they established it? The answer is no mystery. The poet Judith Wright states the sentiment and method clearly: “Finders keepers, losers weepers,” and: “We took the land at gunpoint.” 46 Xavier Herbert in Capricornia, published in 1938, spends Chapter One describing how the early colonists in the Northern Territory shot and poisoned the Aborigines in order to establish themselves. 47 The maintenance of privilege is incarnated in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith by the character of Sergeant Farrell. He employs Jimmie for a short time as a trooper and during this period, a young upper-class white male is killed in the “blacks’ camp”. Sergeant Farrell’s duty is simply to maintain order, and not just order in the general meaning of stability, but the particular order of stratified colonial society. He first of all demonstrates brutality and considerable contempt towards a white boy who witnessed the murder. What Farrell scorns is not so much the hypocrisy of the upper class youths in using black women as prostitutes, but in being caught doing it. He bullies the young man into giving him details about the murder. He then takes Jimmie to the camp and we see a display of colonial oppression at its best. Farrell rides into the camp, and beats the nearest Aborigine to the ground without any reason but to demonstrate who is the more powerful. He encourages Jimmie to do likewise, and Jimmie does. Farrell rides about on his horse lashing out at any Aborigine he can. His aim is purely to reinforce their fear of the greater power of the white. He finally arrests Harry Edwards and incarcerates him. Farrell knows that Harry Edwards was only defending himself when the white man became violent under the influence of alcohol. The important point is that Farrell does not care. The black man is not allowed to retaliate under any circumstances, and must be punished if he does.

Farrell does his job well in maintaining local order by sheer brute force. In so doing, he appears to resort to the method used in general. But Farrell’s role is not just
that of the brutal representative of law and order. We see his private side as well. The
man himself is portrayed as fundamentally corrupt and depraved. During the night that
Harry Edwards is imprisoned, Farrell gets very drunk. He crashes around the police
station growling like a monster. Jimmie is woken later in the night by the sounds of
cries. The next morning, Harry Edwards has hanged himself with his belt. There is an
implicit suggestion that Farrell raped Harry Edwards, and that is why he hanged
himself, as at one stage we glimpse Farrell with his trousers undone. The impact of this
event on Jimmie is immediate. As Pauline Kael observes: “Jimmie is forced to
understand that he is as powerless as the mutilated corpse.”
In Jimmie’s comprehension the spectator also comes to understand the precise nature of how the
Aborigines are rendered powerless.

The image of Farrell’s personal enforcement of colonial order is amplified at the
institutional level in the character of the butcher who is also the hangman in the state of
New South Wales. We never see this man at his job but we do witness his approach to
it. Unlike Farrell, the hangman is cold and impersonal and distances himself from the
violent acts he commits. When a client at his butcher’s shop asks him about the thrill of
being the last person that a murderer must face, he replies that he is only part of the
apparatus. This is a man who displays no compassion for his fellow human beings,
they are no different from the animals he slaughters. In a later scene taking place in a
lodge, he learns that he will be given an OBE for his services as an executioner. At the
very end of the film, he spies through a hole in Jimmie’s cell door to gauge the size of
the black man’s neck. But the butcher/executioner is of course not racially
discriminatory about the humans he slaughters. The fact that Jimmie is black is of no
interest to him beyond the fact that as an Aborigine, Jimmie has a thicker neck than a
white male, and the hangman has to allow for this. The brief scenes of the hangman in
a club illustrate his loyalty to the sort of men who frequent clubs: defenders of the *status quo* such as judges, not victims of it, such as convicts and labourers.

The only character in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* who does show any genuine compassion towards the Aborigines is the schoolteacher, McCready, whom Jimmie and Mort take hostage. As we have seen in the chapter on periodisation, McCready carries out a sort of review of the colonisation of Australia. But McCready is also represented as a severe asthmatic, whose health is fragile. This aspect of McCready’s character effectively results in him being interpreted as weak and ineffectual. Although he is aware of the injustices committed in the name of colonisation, he is not strong enough to do anything to prevent them. Symbolically, this character encapsulates the powerlessness of isolated individuals who do not agree with the State’s activities. Nevertheless, despite McCready’s admirable awareness of the impact of colonisation on the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, his life as a rural schoolteacher despite its ordinariness relative to other Europeans, is still one of privilege in comparison to the Aborigines’. His very role as a teacher does nothing but increase the power of the colonising whites.

In *La Victoire en chantant*, white society is also portrayed exclusively as mediocre and corrupt. There are no McCready’s in this film. The main white character, Fresnois, is portrayed at the beginning as potentially sympathetic to the black community. When he witnesses the Sergeant, played by Jean Carmet, instructing the black men that they are going to fight on behalf of France, he insists that the speech be translated so that the villagers can understand. In addition, Fresnois is educated as a teacher of geography, and his power to reason is contrasted with the stubborn ignorance of the rest of the white community, most particularly, the three shopkeepers and their wives. After the failed attack against the Germans, Fresnois offers the benefit of his education and superior intellect to develop the strategy for a further attack. His
character is of minor interest until this point, but from then on, with the military power transferred from the Sergeant to him, Fresnois changes dramatically. He installs himself in an office protected by a black official and only sees his fellow whites by appointment. On one occasion he refuses to grant such an appointment, and the only apparent reason is to affirm his power. During the rest of the film, we witness his transformation into a fully-evolved technocrat. Fresnois loses track of the original mission to defend the French colony against the neighbouring German one, and virtually establishes himself as a *de facto* prince. The rest of the whites seem almost relieved to have someone take on responsibility for their safety and allow Fresnois to conduct himself in his new regal manner. He demonstrates his contempt for his fellow settlers when he introduces them in a line to his African woman companion at a small ceremony. They bow to her and salute him. But at the end of the film, Fresnois’s relationship with the black woman is thrown into doubt rather than being a sign of genuine interracial bonding. In the closing scene of the film, Fresnois is walking into the bush with an English officer, their manner of looking at each other suggesting mutual physical attraction.

Fresnois’s character is a striking synecdoche of colonialism. Jean-Jacques Annaud is showing quite clearly that colonial power, like any form of power, is inherently corrupt. He introduces a well-spoken, rational man and shows his evolution into a keeper of privilege. As such, Fresnois is not the embodiment of the archetypal colonist, but rather the embodiment of the colonial system itself. This man like the system, is carried away by his capacity to momentarily seduce people into accepting him as their saviour. The closing scene in which Fresnois is subtly shown to be homosexual, if viewed in the context of his embodiment of the system, is not a criticism of this sexuality but rather a comment that the system is ultimately impotent, incapable of reproduction, hence, doomed to collapse.
The majority of the French and Australian films in the corpus represent white societies similarly as populated by mediocre or corrupted individuals. We have already seen traces of this in films discussed in the other chapters, for example, Indochine, Chocolat, Les Caprices d’un fleuve, Coup de torchon, Manganinnie and Picnic at Hanging Rock. What we can decipher from these choices of characters is that this is how the filmmakers themselves perceive the colonialist classes, and that they wish to convey this impression to their audiences.

This mediocrity is further visible in two French films which both came out in 1990, both directed by female directors who were also actresses, and both filming stories based on their respective colonial childhoods. Le Bal du gouverneur by Marie-France Pisier, is set in 1950s New Caledonia and shows the life of a colonial official, Charles Forestier, who works for the governor. He is shown in one scene wielding authority over his daughter and wife until the phone rings. It is his boss, the governor, and in an instant, we see how obsequious he is to someone with power over him. Meanwhile, when he is out at work, his wife, Marie, played by Kristin Scott Thomas, tries to seduce her doctor. The daughter, Théa, is almost molested by a lighthouse keeper. The Forestier family, around whom the film is focussed, is the model for the mediocre government employee class in New Caledonia.

This same mediocrity of the colonial upper class carries over to Outremer by Brigitte Roüan. The film shows the life of three adult daughters during the 1950s in Algiers, capital of Algeria (although it is actually filmed in Tunisia). Their father is a wealthy landowner and so the girls lead somewhat decadent lives, distanced from anything faced by the Arabs who make up the majority of the population. Their lifestyle is captured in the very first scene of the film, set in 1949, when they land a small plane in a dangerous manner on their father’s property. In other scenes through the film, we see the three sisters on the beach, sitting under some trees, dancing at a
ball. One of them, Zon, shows the nature of her meaningless life when we see her flagellating herself. Her almost psychotic state seems to have been provoked with little reason beyond having upset her husband. None of the characters represented in Outremer is capable of really arousing the viewers’ respect, and as a consequence, they are left with a diminished image of the entire well-to-do settler.

Both Pisier and Roüan have represented their respective colonial childhoods more positively compared to their colleague, Claire Denis, in Chocolat. Marie-France Pisier recalls:

Colonisation, for me, is not the struggle for survival that I wasn’t familiar with, but the rampant and abominable niceness of everyone in their place. The Whites and the Blacks did not live together but in their way of living side by side there was a sort of sensuousness, and the film says that among them something was possible still without coming to violence.\textsuperscript{50}

Pisier’s attempt at criticising the attitude toward what is essentially segregation is quickly neutralised in her next sentence. She in fact reveals that she found harmony in this stratification of colonial society, but one wonders what her view would be if she were Kanak. Roüan is, in the same article, somewhat more critical of the French settlers’ treatment of the indigenous people, but only obliquely:

When Madeleine, one of the three sisters that I play, says to one of her workers who has just had another child: “Go by the house, Sir will give you a bit of money and a parcel of clothes”, it was clear to me in two lines that we didn’t maltreat the Algerians but all the same had a comfortably paternalistic relationship with them.\textsuperscript{51}

Even though Roüan admits that colonial society was paternalistic, she does not underline the fact that the Algerian father has to work for a salary that is obviously inadequate.

The notable exception to the more common representation of white communities as being composed of mediocre people is The Man from Snowy River. In this film everyone is a hero. As a result, it attracted huge audiences and in so doing, contributed significantly to a particularly narrow conception of the colonial past. It makes not even the slightest reference to the Aborigines, thus dispensing with the most important element of the colonisation of Australia: the usurpation of another people’s
Secondly, having created the fantasy that the land was uninhabited, the film’s narrative revolves around the glorification of a young man who learns to dominate a mountainous part of it. There is no equivalent to The Man from Snowy River among either the other films of the Australian corpus or those in the French one. The explorers in Burke and Wills (1985) reveal themselves to be incompetent, and their deaths remind us that the Australian land is stronger than the European pretenders to its throne. The title character of Mad Dog Morgan (1976) and the character Captain Starlight in Robbery Under Arms (1985) are simply highway men transposed to Australia. One can imagine even the Irish rebelliousness taking place in Britain where only the landscape has changed because the main theme remains the same: challenging authority. Their characters and their transgressions against authority are not specifically colonial, none of them embodies the spirit of colonialism in the way The Man from Snowy River’s Jim Craig does.

Similarly, few of the characters in the French films incarnate colonialism in this way. Gérard Depardieu’s Lieutenant Saganne shows a lot of bravery in fighting Omar’s rebel warriors in the Sahara, but the French officer’s fate is insanity and death, not triumph. Bernard Giraudeau’s Jean-François de la Plaine experiences similar success in defeating a group of Arab slavetraders, but in his case, it is not for the glory of France, but for a personal motive, to find Amélie, the black girl with whom he has fallen in love.

The most frequent representation of white communities in postcolonial films therefore is not one that glorifies colonialism, even in films by sympathetic directors such as Pisier and Roüan. These communities are peopled with individuals whose privileged position only comes from the direct oppression of the colonies’ former inhabitants. The privilege results in turn not from an inherent racial or cultural superiority, but from the superior fire-power of the military and police presence. The
white characters are never shown as racially superior in the way they were in early films such as Chauvel’s *Heritage* or in the French colonial films of the 1920s and 1930s.

The distinction between representing whites and representing blacks is, with few exceptions, most notably *Walkabout* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, that the spectator only sees the outside of the blacks’ cultures, and with no exceptions, they always see the inside of the whites’. This must surely have the effect of creating an affinity, even if subconsciously, with the white characters, no matter how mediocre or decadent they are. The spectator simply never gets a chance to see the private lives of the blacks and to identify with these characters. Not only do the white characters dominate the screen quantitatively in terms of projection time, but also they dominate the narrative qualitatively in terms of the depth with which their lives are depicted. Even in *Chocolat*, we do not get to see where the Africans sleep. Our view of their lives is almost exclusively from the outside. Compare that to the degree to which we are immersed into the lives of the characters of *Rue-Cases*. The problem is whether we can determine if this qualitative bias is strong enough to cancel out the positive effects of the otherwise well-intentioned narrative elements that we have discussed in this chapter.

This question returns us to the debate of knowing the Other and looking for clues that promise the possibility of cultural exchange. It is probably true that a film made by a European filmmaker can only genuinely represent a European viewpoint. When the European attempts to represent another culture, she or he is faced with three choices: 1) Only show a superficial minimum; 2) Fabricate it; or 3) Enlist the advice of one of its members. We noted examples of this last choice in *La Bataille d’Alger* and *Backroads*. The early colonial films produced in the 1920s and 1930s opted for the second choice.
and confabulated non-European cultures to match preconceived ideas of race and racialism. It appears that the films in our corpus have, with the exception of *Walkabout* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, chosen the first option, that is to show the other culture just as it appears to an uninformed observer. When professional advisers are consulted, and mentioned in the credits such as in *Indochine*, they are not indigenous - in this particular case, French historians Benjamin Stora and Nelly Krowolski. No Vietnamese person is named.

A few films show signs of the possibility of cultural exchange - for example, *We of the Never Never* and *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* - and by so doing, challenge the notion of European superiority. These films are exceptions but they also ultimately safeguard the position of the white character. Jeannie never thinks to leave the station and Jean-François never thinks to resign as governor.

This brings us to the earlier problem we mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter: the problem of representing the institutionalised racial divisions of the past which have been discredited in the mind of the contemporary viewer. If the filmmakers represent the historical colonial situation as it most likely was, that is without the existence of substantial challenges to any of its structures from the colonisers themselves, then surely this is a historically valid representation. However, we have seen that there is a tendency for filmmakers to depict a character who does challenge the colonial ideology, the most notable examples being Luc Segalen from *Chocolat* and McCready from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. On the one hand, they can be accused of falsely representing the past. On the other, the use of such characters appears to be a conscious attempt by the filmmakers to connect their contemporary viewers to the past represented in the film.52

If we recall Pierre Sorlin’s argument that filmmakers are not historians, we can accept, or at least understand, that they are not obliged to produce historically correct
representations of the past, especially if their aim is to comment on the contemporary society for which their film is targeted by creating an allegory of its own history. But, if this is the case, for the films in our corpus, how can this be reconciled with other contradictory and no doubt unconscious elements in these same films? The lack of sustained interracial relationships, the minimal portrayals of indigenous cultures contrasted with the prominence given to white cultures, all reveal that contemporary France and Australia are still more Eurocentric in their beliefs than they admit to. The racism and class distinction that drove the colonial mechanism is not openly justified in the way it was in the past, but it continues to a degree, and the films in our corpus have not therefore challenged it as much as they would have hoped. Nevertheless, films such as *La Victoire en chantant*, *Chocolat* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* show that there is genuine dissent in the contemporary period.

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1 Cf. Footnote 1, Introduction.
9 Quoted from the captions appearing during the beginning of the film.
10 William Routt, op. cit.
15 Cited by Geoffrey Bennington in *Judging Lyotard*, op. cit., p. 151. Bennington studies the particular case of the war between Alba Longa and Rome to determine if this is a case of a *différend*, and if so, why.
17 Ibid.
23 “Je voulais raconter la vie coloniale de tous les jours. Puisqu’on se parlait peu entre Noirs et Blancs, il n’y avait pas de possibilité de communiquer avec des mots. Les images visuelles doivent expliquer les relations. Je crois qu’un plan de caméra peut beaucoup révéler s’il dure assez longtemps.” Tr. John Emerson. The interview with Claire Denis was cited by Margaret Pomeranz in her presentation of the film on SBS, 25 October 1995.
26 Marcia Langton. ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...’ Woolloomooloo, Australian Film Commission, 1993, pp. 42-43: “It was through this film too that some of the Aboriginal audience developed a cringe about the ‘negative’ portrayal of alcohol consumption by Aboriginal people, however honest and without malice this portrayal was. This cringe has remained a discomforting and, I would argue, a conservative restraint on Aboriginal creativity.”
27 Todorov, op. cit., p. 264.
28 Ibid.
30 Jeannie Gunn is played by Angela Punch McGregor, the same actor who played Gilda Blacksmith.
31 The display of cynical humour is one of the attributes of Backroads that Marcia Langton comments favourably on in ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and saw it on the television...’ (op. cit.).
32 Mon Blanc est gras et gros / Il est lourd comme un bœuf. / Curieux Blancs! / Curieux Blancs! / Ton Blanc est gras et gros, / Mais le mien sent des pieds.
34 In French: “Je peux capturer beaucoup de ces sauvages. Ils sont très nombreux, très robustes et très bêtes. Les gens de mon village n’ont jamais aimé les gens de la savane.” Tr. John Emerson.
37 Alain Ménil. “*Rue Cases-Nègres* ou les Antilles de l’Intérieur”. *Présence Africaine*. No. 129, 1st Quarter, 1984, pp. 101-102. “Nous nous sommes donc reconnus dans ce film, comme jamais auparavant. Mais que veut dire ‘se reconnaître’ au cinéma? Cette reconnaissance peut en effet désigner aussi bien que l’image proposée de soi est adéquate à son référent (avec tous les risques contenus dans l’illusion référentielle), ou que cette image est celle que l’on projette par devant soi, image idéale où le moi ne s’appréhende qu’à travers ce Moi Idéal, en un miroir fidèlement déformant. Qu’avons-nous donc reconnu, un ‘réel’ transcrit avec exactitude, ou ce qui en est resté, compte tenu de toutes les déformations que notre imaginaire a imposées à son référent, jusqu’à le re-formuler idéalement? Il s’agit de tout cela à la fois, et ce film en joue habilement, mêlant une certaine objectivité au halo nostalgique, où ce sépia nous conduit plus sûrement.” Tr. John Emerson.
40 Brown, op. cit., pp. 484-485.

Cited in Girardet, op. cit, p. 48. “Est-ce qu’il est possible de nier que ce soit une bonne fortune pour ces malheureuses populations de l’Afrique équatoriale de tomber sous le protectorat de la nation française ou de la nation anglaise?”

We must not forget that even Jimmie Blacksmith has fifty percent European heritage.


Memmi, op. cit., p. 73.


John Ralston Saul explains the term technocrat: “The roots appear to be describing someone who has power (*crat*) thanks to their specialized knowledge or skills (*techne*). Observation of the technocrat at work is enough to tell us that the roots have been inversed. This is someone whose skill is the exercise of power. It follows quite naturally that there is no suggestion of purpose, direction, responsibility or ethics. Just power.” See *The Doubter’s Companion*. Ringwood, Penguin, 1995, p. 281.

Frédéric Strauss. “Mémoires d’exil : féminin colonial”. *Cahiers du cinéma*, No. 434, July-August 1990, p. 32. “La colonisation pour moi, ce n’est pas la schlague que je n’ai pas connue, mais cette douceur rampante et abominable du chacun à sa place. Les Blancs et les Noirs ne vivaient pas ensemble mais il y avait dans leur façon de vivre côte à côte une espèce de sensualité et le film dit qu’entre eux quelque chose était encore possible sans en arriver à la violence.” Tr. John Emerson.

Ibid. “Lorsque Madeleine, l’une des trois sœurs que j’interprète, dit à un de ses ouvriers qui vient d’avoir un nouvel enfant : «Passe par la maison, Monsieur te donnera un peu d’argent et un paquet de vêtements, il était clair pour moi, en deux repliques, qu’on ne maltraitait pas les Algériens mais que nous avions avec eux quand même des relations tranquillement paternalistes.” Tr. John Emerson.

We investigate the impact of apparently anachronistic characters in Chapter Six, in our comparison of Jeannie Gunn in the film, *We of the Never-Never*, with her autobiographical original.

Cf. Introduction, pp.16-17.
Chapter 5

Relating Symbolic Structures to Historical Verisimilitude

The four previous chapters have concentrated on analysing predominant aspects of the content in the films of our corpus. The aim of this fifth chapter is to extend this perspective by examining how much of this content is organised into widely recognised symbolic structures, and then by determining what impact these structures have on the overall representations of the colonial past.

The most predominant, recurring symbolic structures in our films are the focus of this chapter: the Journey, the Orphan, the Noble Savage, and Darkness. They are associated with myths and archetypes that make them instantly recognisable to viewers. Their interest here lies in the manner in which they influence the specific representation of the colonial past in the films of our corpus. Do they provide a means of further interpreting the attitudes of filmmakers who, as artists, are society’s barometers? If so, how can the frequent use of symbolic structures serve the cause of historical verisimilitude in these films? These are the questions that we will be asking with the aim of reaching a deeper understanding of the way in which a director leads a viewer towards a particular perspective on the colonial past. This is the chapter in which we investigate most explicitly the influence of structural devices on content and, ultimately, on interpretation.
The Journey

The journey forms part of the myth of the quest. A key myth in Western culture is the Quest for the Holy Grail, which is the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper. Drinking from this Holy Grail endows the drinker with eternal life and, ultimately, with eternal knowledge. In our corpus, the journey is often more prosaic, but it carries nonetheless the symbolic associations of myth and legend. The implications in undertaking a journey are that one is seeking, if not eternal life or spiritual enlightenment, to improve one’s understanding of the world.

In the films of our corpus, the journey emerges as the primary structural device around which the narrative turns. Kevin Brown, in his article on the Go-Between discussed in the previous chapter, comments also on the frequency of the journey in films depicting colonialism. Brown distinguishes between two sorts of journeys, the “one-way” and the “return”. In respect of its particular presence in Australian films, he finds a one-way journey “suggests that some intelligent Europeans can appreciate Aboriginal culture and move towards it”. The primary example he cites as illustrating this is We of the Never Never (Auzins, 1982), a film we discussed in the previous chapter. We can recall that, in this film, which is one of the few based on an actual life, Jeannie Gunn moves from Melbourne to the outback Northern Territory to live with her new husband Aeneas on a station where he is the manager. Once there, Jeannie discovers that, although the Aborigines have been displaced, they nevertheless remain committed to preserving as much of their culture as possible. Jeannie tries to understand their culture and realises that it is as complex and as complete as her own. Within the film’s own diegetic limits, Jeannie does not return to the city, but prefers to stay on and try to integrate as much with the Aborigines as with her husband’s Anglo-Celtic stock hands.
We can certainly argue that there is a Eurocentric bias here as it is Jeannie who is able to make the effort to understand the culture of the Other and not the other way round. In fact, as we commented in the previous chapter, a segment of We of the Never Never in which there are English subtitles translating Aboriginal dialogue illustrates that the local Aborigines do not understand the culture of the “whitefella” at all, and Jeannie in particular. But we must also take into account the greater context of this story: that Jeannie Gunn did not keep her discovery about Aborigines to herself. She wrote and published a book about it. In other words, she spread her experiences across a white readership and no doubt in so doing, became one of the early contributors to white Australians’ awareness of indigenous cultures. So the journey in We of the Never Never, the film, fulfils a quite significant symbolic trajectory. By taking up the disseminating role of the book, it becomes in turn not just the obvious path of one woman’s journey to understanding another culture, but a precursor to the eventual journey of the Australian nation towards recognition of its indigenous peoples, which led to the referendum vote of 1967 acknowledging them as having equal rights to their colonisers.

Brown also argues that the narrative structure of the return journey is used to demonstrate European superiority. The return journey “suggests that Europeans in the bush are out of place but may learn to live within it with the help of Aborigines. They may also move back to European society.” Of the five films that Brown cites as being composed around the return journey are three with colonial settings, Elisa Fraser (Burstall, 1976), Mad Dog Morgan (Mora, 1976) and Manganinnie (Honey, 1980); and two with contemporary settings, Walkabout (Roeg, 1971) and Storm Boy (Safran, 1976).
Having analysed both kinds of journey in his selection of Australian films depicting European-Aboriginal relations, Brown concludes that they both privilege the movement of Europeans, in either direction, but not of Aborigines:

The films therefore tend to fix Aboriginal people to their ‘place’ in the bush (Aboriginal characters who are largely in control) and question the possibility of Aboriginal attempts to live in European society (Aboriginal characters who are largely not in control).

Brown is reading the journey in the films he studies as a symbol of intercultural exchange, or the experiencing of another culture. But he finds, as we confirmed for Jeannie Gunn, that it is the European characters who are making these journeys, not the indigenous ones. This is no doubt the result of well-meaning intent on the part of the filmmakers, who are most likely trying to counteract the insularity of their European-descended viewers from any contact with Aboriginal cultures. By making films where white characters experience an indigenous culture, and emerge enriched, such as Jeannie in *We of the Never Never*, or the Girl in *Walkabout*, the directors are trying to inspire some of their spectators to think about doing the same.

If it is the whites who are always shown as adapting to or entering or experiencing the indigenous culture, and not the other way round, the resultant asymmetry is bound to imply that the blacks are unable to adapt in the same way. According to Brown’s analysis, this is the assumption that prevails: white culture is sophisticated and indigenous cultures are simple, which implies that whites will easily be able to adapt to the primitive culture but not the reverse. One Australian film shows an example of this one-way adaptive quality at its appalling best - *Journey Among Women* (Tom Cowan, 1977). In this film, some female English convicts escape from custody and flee into the bush. They have no idea of how to survive in such an environment and are lucky enough to meet a lone Aboriginal woman, played by Lillian Crombie. Within what appears to be a miraculously short period of time, the white women are not only able to find food and water and build shelters, but are actually living the Aboriginal lifestyle. In other words, in a matter of weeks, they have completely adapted to a migratory
hunter-gatherer lifestyle and taken on some of the corresponding beliefs. But if we recall the shocking scenes of harsh treatment and corruption in the white community at the start of this film, it may be equally likely that the director was attempting to show how desperate the women were to divest themselves of it as rapidly as possible.

The problem remains as to whether the fact that the journey motif only includes white characters has the end effect of “fixing” Aborigines in their place. In *We of the Never Never*, we see many instances of the adoption of white habits by Aborigines: attempts that only end in rejection. How is this to be interpreted? In one example, Jeannie orders Goggle-Eye to wear trousers instead of his traditional loin cloth. He does not like wearing them and stops doing so. This is his choice, and it is not because he is incapable of wearing them. Does that lead us to the conclusion that he is unable to wear trousers because he is primitive? Another example is when Jeannie attempts to employ three of the Aboriginal women as house servants. They quit at the earliest opportunity and do not even tell her. This is just as easily read as an illustration of the women’s mobility to leave the space of the invader as an example of their incapacity to work in the house.

In *Walkabout*, which we discussed in Chapter 2, we see the most striking of the examples of the journey motif. This is also a film in which the whites come into the black territory and leave (return journey) while the black stays in it. Is the Aboriginal character played by the 16 year old David Gulpilil unable to enter the European space of the coloniser? The key scene that responds to this question is the one near the end of the film where the three characters discover the old abandoned homestead. The Girl’s reaction is immediate: she runs towards it in the hope of rejoining white civilisation. The Black Boy sees the old homestead as a place where he and the Girl could settle. The symbolic connotations become complex at this point. The Black Boy does show the desire and capability to adapt from his migratory lifestyle. The Girl rejects his
advances and devastated, the Black Boy commits suicide. This scene is symbolic of the
general outcome of European-Aboriginal contact: blacks are not invited to join white
civilisation. This, as we have seen, is the subject of _The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith_.
Thus, if the Aboriginal character in _Walkabout_ is fixed to his place in the bush, it is not
because he is incapable of leaving, but because he is not permitted to.

In this scene, there is also the abandoned house to consider. It clearly
symbolises the failure of white civilisation in the past to establish itself in this area.
Ultimately, the whites of that period have been returned to their place. The Girl is the
example that confirms this movement. She cannot cope with living in a space where
colonisation has failed and returns to Sydney. The return journey, then, has the effect of
fixing the whites to their place: in this case, the city.

Thus, Brown’s argument that mobility always translates as intercultural
adaptability shows itself as too narrow in its perspective. Immobility or “fixity” can
also have positive connotations if equated with stability, and Brown seems not to have
considered this interpretation. Furthermore, the move back to white society can also
signify retreat: the traveller is, in the long term, not able to adapt.

Turning now to the French films, we find many of the same symbolic
associations attached to the journey of the protagonist. In _Fort Saganne_, we see an
example of a return journey. Depardieu’s Lieutenant Saganne journeys into the Sahara
desert to bring order to the French colony and then returns to France. He is shown to
have a remarkable capacity to adapt to the climactic conditions and to the lifestyles of
the resident nomads. At no time do we see the reverse: a nomad adapting to the French
way of life. The indigenous soldiers in French uniform are being employed for their
migratory expertise and are not integrated into any local French community. Further,
Saganne saves the life of a Berber friend and such a scene can imply that Europeans are
necessary for the nomads’ survival, thus justifying colonialism. But, in fact, elements
of the film challenge the assumption that the Europeans are being portrayed as superior. Three of the French soldiers are depicted as quite mad, this being the result of their inability to adapt to their desert environs: the sergeant in the fort which will eventually be named after Saganne, the rooftop cellist played by Hippolyte Girardot, and Capitaine Baculard who psychotically protects the French territory under his command from Saganne. At the end of the film, Saganne himself seems to have lost his sanity as he charges at the Germans calling for Allah. From these examples, it is evident that Fort Saganne contests the legitimacy of French colonialism.

In Chocolat we also see the return journey, this time as experienced by two characters. In Marc Dalens’s short journey around his administrative territory, he visits a number of villages and speaks to their elders. The way in which Marc’s journey is filmed and edited is the key to its interpretation. We see him almost exclusively through wide-angle panoramic shots that punctuate the main narrative taking place at the house. These long shots have the effect of reducing Marc to a tiny figure within a vast area of space. Although it is he who is on the move, and the villagers who are “fixed”, he has no presence which could be seen as superior. Rather, Marc’s “return journey” symbolises the irrelevance of the French presence in Africa.

This irrelevance is reinforced in the character France’s adult journey to Cameroon. The film’s opening shot shows her in a wide-angle pan as a tiny figure on a beach unable to comprehend her environment. She is watching the black American, William, and his son lying in the water, at one with their ancestral environment. At this stage we do not know what relationship exists between the woman France and the two blacks, but we can immediately guess that their attitudes towards Africa are very different. To France, despite her colonial childhood, Africa has become alien. To William and his son, despite their immediate American background, Africa is their ultimate origin and home. At the end of the film, France’s (the character) decision to
return to France (the country) represents more accurately not a return so much as an 
interruption. She has arrived at the portals of the alien land only to turn back without 
completing her journey as she had envisaged it. The motif of the journey in Chocolat 
symbolises not the adaptability of the European being juxtaposed against the immobility 
of the indigenous population, but the historical failure of European culture to have any 
enduring influence.

We can see that the return journey in both the French films we have just 
discussed, and in the Australian ones studied by Kevin Brown that we commented on 
earlier, are not so easily dismissed as symbolising outright European superiority. The 
adult France’s journey is interrupted. She returns without having fulfilled the goal of 
her journey: to come to terms with her colonial childhood. The madness that leads 
Depardieu’s Saganne to cross the ridge and be shot is directly linked to his colonial 
journey with the shout of “Allah!” Both these French return journeys show not an 
adaptability to indigenous culture and space, but the opposite. France (the character) and 
Saganne retreat after they understand the error of colonisation and wish to correct it.

One-way journeys are significant in L’Amant/The Lover, Indochine and Les 
Caprices d’un fleuve, although the direction the journey can take is not always identical. 
It is interesting to note that, according to the period in which the films are set, the 
journey is either from France or towards it. The first two films are set in the closing 
days of the Empire in Indochina and both main characters journey permanently to 
France at the end. In Les Caprices, set in the establishing days of what is now Senegal, 
the main character journeys definitively from France. We can see that these movements 
are consistent with the historical verisimilitude of the films, but we should expect 
nevertheless that these journeys would have added symbolic emphasis for their 
contemporary audiences.
Once again, we will see that these journeys, at first glance, fix the indigenous peoples to their lands while the colonisers are those on the move. In the case of Eliane, in *Indochine*, although she was born in Indochina, she inherited a European lifestyle. Her individual journey is one-way and it can also be read as symbolising the withdrawal of France. Unlike France, Eliane returns rich from the sale of the land she possessed. She also returns with Etienne, the child of Camille and Jean-Baptiste. This is significant in that Etienne is the result of the union of a Frenchman and an Indochinese girl. The boy embodies the marriage of French and Indochinese culture, while the “full-blooded” Indochinese characters remain in Indochina. It is to be remembered that Camille’s presence in Geneva at the end of the film is temporary.

Similarly, in Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *The Lover/L’Amant*, the young girl played by Jane March returns to France at the end of the film and the Chinese and indigenous Indochinese remain “fixed”. But these two films can be interpreted quite differently. Because of *The Lover/L’Amant*’s commercial concerns, it makes little attempt to represent a balanced view of colonial Indochina. There are not even any major characters in the film that are Indo-Chinese. The colony’s indigenous population simply forms part of the exotic background, bustling around earning a living outside in the busy street while the two lovers indulge themselves at length. The result is that the Indo-Chinese in this film are portrayed as distinctly inferior. When the girl leaves for France, she is clearly going back to higher culture and leaving behind the abandoned hedonism of her tropical paradise. The film is easily read superficially within the terms of Kevin Brown, that is, the indigenous people are “fixed” in to their place and status. But can the French films ultimately be interpreted according to the same paradigms as the Australian ones, given the different French colonial experience?

*Indochine* is more complex than *The Lover/L’Amant* as it shows several points of view, most notably, the slave market on Dragon Island. Eliane does not leave
Indochina of her own free will. Firstly, she is forced out by the rising political power that the indigenous people wield against their colonial French oppressors. Secondly, we see the development of this rising political power through Camille, Jean-Baptiste and Tanh. Thus, the viewer is made aware of the strength of the Indo-chinese people who are about to regain autonomy from France. When the French protagonist leaves Indochina, it is not a sign of fixity or inferiority on the part of the Indochnese, but rather a sign of their newly-earned superiority over France. The colonising power is being forced to withdraw. Consequently, in Indochine, the one-way journey symbolises European retreat and highlights the strength and solidarity of the indigenous population.

In Les Caprices d’un fleuve the main character, Jean-François de la Plaine, leaves the Versailles court by order of the King to be Governor in Cap St-Louis. Although Jean-François returns briefly to France, by the end of the film he has come back to Africa permanently. This film is almost the French equivalent to We of the Never Never from Australia, in that it relates the story of a European who moves from a fashionable white cultural nexus – Melbourne in the case of Jeannie – to settle in the “uncivilised” environment of the colonised people. These two films are in a way the closest allegories of the original colonial act itself. We discovered in We of the Never Never that the indigenous people do not participate in white culture: that is, journey towards it, because they do not wish to, not because they are not able to. They are not fixed in the sense of Brown’s use of the term: they are clearly represented in the film as making conscious decisions to resist white domination.

In Les Caprices d’un fleuve, we do not see this same resistance. The two main black characters are Amélie, who becomes Jean-François’s mistress, and Anne, the slave trader. The other African characters have either minor speaking roles or are extras. They are represented in general as passive or as offering minimal resistance.
The migratory Arab traders are portrayed as being more concerned for their slave trading operations than by any colonial claims coming from France.

To interpret the symbolic value of the journey in Les Caprices d’un fleuve, we need to understand the circumstances which cause it. At the beginning of the film, it appears as though the journey will be a return one. Jean-François de la Plaine has been forced to take the governorship in Africa for killing a friend of the king. Jean-François despises his new environment, writes frequently to his mistress, Louise, and cannot wait to return to Versailles. The decision to remain in Africa comes about as a consequence of his chance alliance withs the slave girl, Amélie.

The girl and the other Africans are portrayed as honest and caring people. This is in direct contrast to the corruption we witness through Jean-François and his fellow Frenchmen. The African culture is transparent; the French one hides under a surface of counterfeit sophistication. The film carefully draws our attention several times to the Africans’ ability to sing. This is important as it prevents us from judging them as inferior – they are equally as capable of producing art as the “civilised” French. In this way, we are led to view the Africans as equal, culturally, to the French.

This is the discovery that Jean-François makes. He falls in love with Amélie, itself no doubt a revelation, and is led to appreciate her culture. Not only this: as he recognises the corruption that supports his own culture, he decides to abandon it. The result is that his planned return journey becomes one-way. Although he must travel to France to reorganise his life, he returns definitively. The journey in this film, through the character of Jean-François, comes to symbolise first and foremost the distance between European civilisation and the traditional civilisation from which it presumes to have evolved. However, it is true that, once again, the European character makes the journey while the indigenous character stays fixed in her space.
The journeys in the films we have just discussed symbolise cultural movement and it is without exception a Western character who makes the journey. On the surface, such a narrative choice appears to be innocent. It appears to be an ideal means of putting together two cultures which would otherwise not have met. But at the subliminal level, the viewer is aware that it is the Westerner who participates in the journey from one culture to another, especially if this becomes a pattern over many films, which is the case in the films making up the corpus under examination here. It is not possible, however, to argue automatically that some form of filmic colonisation is in operation. All these journeys made by white characters can equally be interpreted as evidence of an awakening desire in white populations to make contact with the peoples they had so long wished to ignore.

We also need to allow for the representation of the indigenous people. If they are represented as being proud of their own culture, then it is logical that they have no desire to leave, which is indeed the case. Despite the poor conditions forced on the Indochinese in Indochine, they retain their ability to resist and will not be forced to flee from their own territory. Similarly, the Aboriginal community in We of the Never-Never lives in poor conditions since being banned from its migratory traditions, but there is no evidence in the film that its people consider the white settlers’ way of life to be worth more than the one they have lost. In films such as these, and in Walkabout and Fort Saganne, the manner in which the indigenous populations are represented can influence the overall symbolism of the journey, most often signifying that they are as politically and culturally sophisticated as Western culture. This is especially true in the case of the French films, as the French did not remain in their colonies like the British in Australia. The implication of the French characters returning or leaving definitively for France is not to fix the colonised peoples in their place, but instead, to show the usurper being sent back to his own land.
The Orphan

The structure of the journey imposes the presence of archetypal figures, whose destiny it is to wander the earth in search of a home. The Orphan is one such figure. In this symbolic use, the term, “Orphan”, covers characters who are either orphans in the literal sense of the term or who, within the diegetical limits of the film, are isolated from family relationships. The majority of the films in this study have major characters who are not part of some form of family unit. Even if we learn that they have wives, fiancées and other relations, these do not appear in the story or have any influence on events. The use of the lone character is so striking that it is obviously crucial to the filmic representation of the colonial experience.

Paul Monaco studied the French cinema of the 1920s and found that about half the films were based around an orphan-like character. He argues that this strikingly high prevalence is not random, but the result of filmmakers of the period responding to unconscious concerns in the broader French population. In the particular case of the French of the time, Monaco believes that the orphan theme reflected their sense of diplomatic abandonment after the end of World War One. J. D. Clancy applies Monaco’s hypothesis to the Australian cinema of the 1970s and finds a similarly high prevalence of orphan-like characters. These films include four on colonial themes that come under our study: Walkabout, Picnic at Hanging Rock, Mad Dog Morgan and The Man from Snowy River. Among the other films are The Devil’s Playground (Fred Schepisi, 1976) and the two Mad Max films (George Miller, 1979 and 1981) released at that time. Clancy examines The Man from Snowy River (George Miller, 1981) and concludes:

Neither the simplicity of the plot, the grandeur of the mountain scenery nor the popular attraction of its origin in Paterson’s famous ballad account for its astonishing success with Australian audiences. What it gives those audiences is a symbolic representation of Australia with the modern world. Ever since the momentous occasion in 1941 when Prime Minister Curtin directed
Australia’s vulnerability, insecurity and loneliness away from one protector, Mother England, and towards another, Uncle Sam, Australia has suffered from an increased ambivalence about its place, and its identity, in the modern world. The Man from Snowy River, like all good myths, encapsulates a dilemma and in this case produces a wish fulfilment solution. Australia in the form of Jim Craig can arrive at adulthood, rejecting the irritating irrelevance of England, and the overpowering patriarchy of the United States, and achieve its own destiny by claiming its own inheritance.9

This film exemplifies the dialectic between symbolic structures and historical verisimilitude. The story is completely fictional and reproduces the myth of the hero to drive its narrative. With such an apparently concrete historical example, contemporary viewers can be reassured both of their predecessors’ heroic deeds and of their own potential to continue the tradition.

Jim Craig is the perfect symbolic embodiment of the mythical Australian. He is hard-working, youthful and he will stop at nothing to attain his clearly defined goals: to regain his right to live in the mountains and to marry Jessica Harrison. His orphan status at the beginning of the film after the sudden death of his father no doubt echoes contemporary Australians’ unspoken fears after being separated from England. The coming marriage to Jessica symbolises the beginning of a new family, the end of loneliness, and a new start.

But The Man from Snowy River accomplishes this triumph of symbolism over history by the use of a very sinister presupposition. As we stated in the introduction, there is a complete and total absence of Australia’s indigenous inhabitants. They have been simply written out of the new symbolically generated history. In removing the Aborigines from existence in such a sweeping manner, the film has fulfilled the terra nullius fantasy on which the Australian colony was founded: nobody’s land, waiting for settlement. In other words, The Man from Snowy River’s creators have fulfilled their audiences’ wishes about finding their own cultural identity, but on the premise that it is only without the Aboriginal people that they can do so.

The Man from Snowy River was released around 1981-1982, a period of uncertainty for non-indigenous Australians after a large group of Pitjanjatjara...
Aborigines had successfully obtained the return of their lands in South Australia.\textsuperscript{10} The film offered white Australians a symbolic release from such threats to their perceived sovereignty. The film spawned a sequel in 1988 which continues the story of Jim Craig’s competition for Jessica, fight against her American father (played by Kirk Douglas in the first film, by Brian Dennehy in the second), and a total Aboriginal absence.\textsuperscript{11} It is notable that between the release of this film and 2001, only one film was released in Australia with a colonial theme, a remake of a remake: \textit{On Our Selection}.\textsuperscript{12}

The continuing success of the land claims, in particular, Mabo in 1992, was no doubt making black-white relations too sensitive a topic to broach in an historical setting.

The film in which the presence of orphan-like characters is most prominent, taking into account the French films as well, is \textit{Walkabout}. The film, as we have already seen, depicts three children separated from their family or community, walking across large areas of primarily unpopulated desert and woodlands. It is notable that there are no other members of the black boy’s community in the film. Yet, unlike the white children, we can surmise that he is not necessarily an orphan in the literal sense. He is perhaps a member of the tribe that we witness playing around the burnt-out Volkswagen, but there is nothing to confirm this. The only other Aborigines are the slave-children who appear in a longer cut of the film and they have no speaking roles. As a consequence of his singularity, the black boy’s character symbolises Aboriginality in its totality in \textit{Walkabout}. In an allegory this is to be expected, but what impact does this have on the film’s audience? From the strictly socio-historical perspective, one representative Aborigine has the effect of masking the enormous diversity of the many hundreds of separate indigenous cultures and blending them all into one.

On the positive side, the use of a lone Aboriginal main character facilitates the familiarisation of white audiences with, above all, the fact that he is a complex human being who is vulnerable and subject to the same emotions as them. This is just as
important as acknowledging his profound understanding of the land and specific skills - like locating water, and hunting and gathering - because it valorises his culture to an audience predisposed to the notion that he is primitive. We can imagine the difference, for example, if Nicholas Roeg decided to have the children discovered by a tribe, maybe the one we see with the Volkswagen. Without the potential to focus in on a single personality, representation of the group would have necessarily produced much less-developed characters and, as a consequence, would have complicated the task of representing cross-cultural interaction.

The white girl and her brother become orphans, as we know, after their father commits suicide. We never learn the fate of the mother, who appears only briefly in the family kitchen at the start of the film. Because their father’s suicide takes place in the desert, their abandonment threatens their survival. The characters played by Jenni Agutter and Lucien John become much more than orphans in the strict sense of the word. They become cultural orphans. At the beginning of *Walkabout*, the spectator’s attention is focussed on the children at school, and later, on the fact that they are surprisingly still wearing school uniform out in the desert. The uniform becomes the symbol of their Western education and highlights its almost total irrelevance to the Australian environment. It is only by chance that the children find a little oasis with a fruit tree and a pond. When it dries up the girl wants to know where the water is kept, as if she were in a shop. Throughout the film we notice the irony created by the contrast between the etiquette and arithmetic lessons coming from the radio tuned in to the School of the Air, and the outback lands the children are crossing. The white children symbolise the experience of the early white explorers of Australia. The English settled a foreign land with the intention of simply reproducing England under a hotter sun, only to discover that their cultural knowledge was not applicable. In a way their culture had
abandoned them. The orphan status of the girl and her brother reflects this break between the colonisers and their imperial and cultural mother England.

The conclusion to *Walkabout* is precipitated by the black boy proposing to the white girl. In spite of the barrier of his language, his intentions are clear. He wishes to settle in the old farmhouse and start a family with the white girl. She rejects him, and his response is to perform a ceremonial dance decorated as a skeleton, and finally to hang himself in a gum tree. If we hold to our argument that each of the two young people is the symbolic embodiment of their respective cultures, then this rejection is also suggestive of the rejection of the Aboriginal presence by English settlers.

We have already discussed the significance of the abandoned house, which symbolises the colonisers’ inability to adapt to their new environment. Importantly, there is the death of the black boy. Suicide seems an extreme measure to take because of a rejection of marriage, particularly from a member of a vastly different cultural group. What is the result of the story choosing this fate for him rather than that of him leaving and returning to his own community? As a symbolic being, his death is important as it evokes the death of the traditional lifestyle of Aboriginal cultures. It is also true, as we learnt from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, that over a quarter of a million Aborigines did in fact die, directly as the result of colonisation, by 1900. In other words, the rejection of the Aborigines by the whites led to a similarly extreme result at a cultural level as a suicide at a personal level.

Orphan-like characters also play major roles in four French postcolonial films, *La Victoire en chantant* (Hubert Fresnoy) *Chocolat* (France, Protée), *Indochine* (Camille) and *Les Caprices d’un fleuve* (Amélie). In the other films, the main characters tend to be part of a family group. The majority of the French films in our corpus do not therefore focus their stories on an isolated character. This finding corresponds to J. D. Clancy’s general point that the orphan-like status symbolises the
breach from the mother culture. France is not a colony, and hence there is no breach to be symbolised by an exceptional number of orphan characters. France’s collective consciousness since the 1970s appears not to be sending out the same distress signals through orphan incarnations as it was doing during the 1920s, which has the effect of giving greater significance to those representations of the orphan that survive into the late twentieth century.

In *Chocolat*, the woman called France who tries to return to the Cameroon of her childhood is very much an orphan. This is in contrast to the girl France in the flashback segment. The young girl in the colonial period is part of a family and, at that time, Cameroon was part of the family of the French Empire. The older France is separated from her family, like the postcolonial Empire. In the two postcolonial segments of *Chocolat*, acting as “bookends” to the main flashback segment, the character of the adult France is juxtaposed to the American black, William. The important difference between France and William is that he has a son, as he reveals to France, to an African-born woman. A son is a symbol of continuity, both genetic and cultural. William’s son in fact legitimises William’s presence in Africa. The few generations of absence are insignificant in comparison with the thousands of generations of Africa’s total history. Correspondingly, France the nation’s few generations of presence in Africa are equally insignificant against this greater history. As the incarnation of French colonialism, France the female character discovers that she has not retained any postcolonial bond at all with Africa. This implies that the colonial bond was not legitimate. Her fate at the end of the film is to admit that she is an orphan in Africa, in other words she has no ties there, family or cultural, and she has no choice but to return to France.

Within the flashback segment, France the family girl is again contrasted, this time with Protée the black servant, with whom she spends most of her time. Protée is the orphan-like character who is cut off from his family, for whom he must enlist the
services of a village scribe to send letters. Protée’s solitary status within the Dalens family obviously affects the way in which European spectators interpret his character. It is not that he is the only African character. Unlike in *Walkabout*, there is the presence of the other African servants, even if they have no speaking parts. Protée is the focus of this colonial segment, however. Protée does have a fiancée, but he has been forced to find work away from her. In other words, the colonial presence – here in the form of the Dalens – has broken up the African family unit, and by extension, African society and culture. This corresponds to the actual historical situation and, as a result, Protée’s character achieves an even greater symbolic presence. His departure at the end without formality or drama is a very strong act in the film. The subjugated African has finally become aware of his ability to be free. This image of freedom is shown during the final credits during which we see three African men relieving themselves on the grass at the edge of the airport from which France is leaving.

The character of Camille in *Indochine* is the only literal orphan in the French films who fits Paul Monaco’s model of the orphan of the 1920s - but with a significant colonial modification:

An individual is abandoned, lost in the world, and up against great odds. The resolution comes when the orphan is recognised for what he or she truly is. Recognition is followed by reward. The modification is that Camille is Vietnamese, not French, and that her recognition has quite different ramifications. The manner in which Eliane adopts Camille encourages the spectator to sympathise with the way France saw her occupation of Indochina in the light of a protector and not as coloniser or invader. The story, although it appears at first to be centering on Eliane, focuses at least as much on Camille. Through her story, as we have seen in previous chapters, we learn that the notion of France as protector is false and nothing but a mask for what was, in fact, forced occupation. Although Camille had been born an Annamite princess and adopted by a wealthy plantation owner, she must begin her climb from the bottom, as a slave, to achieve verisimilitude
on screen as a revolutionary. Camille is the embodiment of the Vietnamese people in *Indochine* and her character has been constructed accordingly in a multi-faceted manner to best designate their diverse experiences under colonialism. Through the film, we see Camille rise again like a phoenix, from slave to revolutionary, and from revolutionary finally to a signatory to the Geneva Agreement giving Indochina independence as Vietnam. The Vietnamese girl has been recognised for her inherent qualities, as was the Vietnamese nation.

Orphans then are seen to achieve a particularly important symbolic role in the postcolonial films. As concrete representatives of their respective cultures, they can facilitate the naïve spectator’s understanding of a very complex situation. If there is an identifiable reliance on history, at least as it is perceived or documented, then the symbolism itself achieves the highest degree of believability. But believability is not the truth, even if it is based on it, or at least a part of it, and the orphan characters can also mask the complexity behind colonial relations just by the sheer narrative necessity of them encapsulating the more obvious characteristics of their cultural group. As we saw with the Aboriginal character in *Walkabout*, this simplification can have positive effects, at the risk perhaps of recreating or reinforcing existing stereotypes. This brings us to the problem of representing the Other through archetypal or mythical figures.

**The Noble Savage**

The myth of the “noble savage” lingers on in non-scientific circles long after being shown up for being a myth. The noble savage -- *bon sauvage* in French -- is a Western myth which, in its essence, contrasts the corruption inherent in civilisation with the apparent honesty and innocence of the primitive African and Pacific populations. It was a new incarnation of the ancient myth of paradise lost, seen, for example, in the Old Testament tale of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. According
to H. N. Fairchild, the precise term “noble savage” was first used by Dryden in the play *Conquest of Granada* in 1701. Jean-Jacques Rousseau has been named for introducing the “noble savage” into philosophical discourse as a way of demonstrating the way in which civilisation causes the decline of moral virtues. We see the noble savage myth as well in the following observation by James Cook, discoverer (from England's point of view) of Australia:

> From what I have said of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched People upon Earth; but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the Superfluous, but with the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe; they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquility which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition. The Earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for Life. They covet not Magnificent Houses, Household-stuff etc.; they live in a Warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air, so they have a very little need of Cloathing [sic]; and this they seem to be fully sencible [sic] of, for many to whom we gave Cloth etc., left it carelessly upon the Sea Beach and in the Woods, as a thing they had no manner of use for; in short, they seem'd to set no Value upon anything we gave them, nor would they ever part with anything of their own for any one Article we could offer them.

Cook's comments may have been uninformed but most of his descriptions here are in fact not so inaccurate, even couched in his Eurocentric viewpoint. The problem is that they are partial. Cook, like all travellers of his period, was influenced enough by the expectations produced by the noble savage myth to perceive only qualities in exotic societies which matched the myth and innocently ignore others which challenged it.

What we can safely argue is that the noble savage myth is more a displaced self-critique of European society than a critique of the colonised society. It is an oblique confession of the failure of European society to live up to the values it espouses. Thus its appearance in contemporary society is the sign that we still feel the same gulf between our ideals and our practice. In postcolonial films, we would argue that the presence of the noble savage myth is not just a superficial misrepresentation of other societies, but a critique of colonialism. The absence of it equally could be viewed as a justification. If the unknown society is not portrayed as better off before white contact, then white contact might be seen to improve it.
Looking at the French films and the Australian films, it is apparent that the myth of the noble savage does have a presence in each, but in varying degrees. At first view, then, these postcolonial films are admitting, at the mythico-symbolic level, that there is a possibility that colonisation was corrupting. Out of the French films, in order of increasing degree, we see the most obviously idealised representations of indigenous societies or individuals in *Coup de torchon*, *La Victoire en chantant*, *Fort Saganne* and *Les Caprices d’un fleuve*. The key scene in *Coup de torchon* is the one in which Lucien Cordier kills Vendredi - French for Friday - after the black man brings back Rose's dead husband, unaware that it was Cordier who had killed him. Vendredi's noble savage status is signified to the viewer by his being named after the character in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*: this innocent, well-meaning act shows how naïve Vendredi is.

Before he shoots Vendredi, Lucien forces the black man to listen to a speech:

Lucien: The blind man pissing out the window is worth more than the joker who told him it was a urinal. Do you know who the joker is? It’s everybody. All the bastards who turn away when you’re in the shit. The pricks rolling in dough with one thumb up their bum, praying for their lives. The stuck-up bourgeois made in the image of God. If so, I wouldn’t want to meet him on a dark night.

You’ve licked too many white arses, Vendredi. If you get screwed, it’s because you deserve it. My point is, with friends like you, this is how I treat them.

[Lucien shoots Vendredi.]

Why does Lucien really kill Vendredi? He obviously resents the black man’s subservience to white people. But if Vendredi is truly a noble savage then he is by definition innocent of corruption and thus unable to recognise it. What we have then is a more serious crime committed by the white man. Lucien, the representative white, is conscious of his society's inherent evil, and the film is about his plan to stop it. Instead of arresting the people who commit evil, he decides to kill them instead, thus increasing the presence of evil even further. By the act of killing an innocent black man, Lucien condemns colonial society as a choice of evil over goodness. This scene in *Coup de torchon* is thus one of the most damning of colonial society among all the contemporary French films on French colonialism.
At the other end of the scale is *Les Caprices d'un fleuve*. Amélie is the main incarnation of the noble savage, but we see the myth evoked also in two minor black characters. The first is Makouta, the old man in the hospital who assists the surgeon. The second is the woman who sings on the boat and surprises Jean-François with the beauty of her voice. These are the characters that are being used in the narrative to build up a broad picture of the noble savage in the film. The noble savage is specifically a black African and not an Arab or Berber. These latter people are slave traders and profit from the innocence of the blacks. The slave trader Anne is a half-caste and is thus corrupted by white blood, which explains her participation in this activity. Amélie, however, is the definitive noble savage. She is introduced to us as a pure young girl, vulnerable and the absolute antithesis of Louise, Jean-François's lover at Versailles. Amélie is the agent of the transformation of Jean-François, who chooses to live in Africa, like Blanet his commandant.

This is surely the core of the film. The colonialist is attracted to the innocent life of the exotic culture, so he moves into it. But it is too late: he is already corrupted, and since he has power, all he is going to do is rebuild the old world he left. The first thing Jean-François does once he decides to spend his life with Amélie is to get her pregnant. In other words, to ensure the dilution of the native culture that was originally so attractive.

In the Australian films, we see the noble savage most strongly present in *Walkabout* - the black boy is the embodiment of the myth. In the scene that takes place after all three children play in the gum trees, and night has fallen, he leaves and assumes a classic noble savage pose. We see him in profile, standing on one leg on a small hill, silhouetted by the last rays of the setting sun. This is the beginning of a very cinematographically powerful montage with shots of the huge round rising sun being
superimposed on each other, complemented by a multilayered soundtrack mixing excerpts from the School of the Air with fragments of previously heard dialogues:

...nothing can ever be created or destroyed... [radio]
...come out now!...[father]
...every man and every woman...star...like a telescope...[radio]

The metaphysical nature of the images and the pieces of radio dialogue overpower the order shouted out by the father as he was trying to kill his children at the beginning of the film. It is as if these ephemeral, earthbound dramas are being swallowed up into the universe and eternity, reinforcing the black boy’s symbolic role as noble savage. As he achieves Messianic status, we understand his potential to purify the white children after their escape from their corrupted father, the representative of Western civilisation. From this point in *Walkabout*, the white children begin to change, most noticeably in shedding their uniform and taking more notice of their natural environment instead of trying to escape it. They start to become noble savages themselves. The culminating scene is when the white girl sheds all her clothes and swims in a waterhole, while her brother helps the black boy to hunt for food.

Other Australian films show traces of the noble savage myth in their representations of Aborigines, but not to the same degree as *Walkabout*. *Eliza Fraser* and *Journey Among Women* depict their Aboriginal characters more from the perspective of the noble savage myth than from reality. *Manganinnie* is the only other Australian film, apart from *Walkabout*, in which a main character incarnates the noble savage. At the beginning of the film, the title character is still with her tribe and they are portrayed in a disappointingly stereotyped fashion, given the year of production, 1980. Firstly, as we watch them seated around the fire, the narrator relates the central myth of their existence: the first being came down from stars bearing fire that had to be kept burning, as there was no way of relighting it. Regardless of whether there is any truth to this, for Aboriginal tribes on the mainland certainly knew how to light fires, the
lack of knowledge about fire makes Manganinnie's people seem appropriately primitive. In the next scene, they are dancing around the fire at night, surely one of the most recurrent depictions of tribal cultures throughout film, but why in 1980? A carefully organised long shot isolates the group in a circle of light juxtaposed against a large section of nighttime black. They are creatures of the night: mysterious, not like us. This image is completed when we see them chased off by the colonial soldiers the next morning. It is daylight, so the creatures of the night are vulnerable. Only Manganinnie remains, and is doomed eventually to die without her community around her.

This film is of course more significant than any other depicting Aborigines as it is set in Tasmania. Thus we have a much more specific location than in other films, except Elisa Fraser, which is set on Fraser Island, off the Queensland coast. Contextually, most Australian viewers are familiar with the tragedy of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Although the little white girl, Joanna, relights Manganinnie's fire and keeps it going after her death, the fire now is just a memory of the noble savage that was: not the lifeforce of a community. At the end of the film, the narrator, who is Joanna as an adult, believes she had done her best to keep the spirit of the River people alive. But oversimplifying the culture of these people to the point where they cannot even light fires, is unwittingly to lessen the genuine horror of the colonisers' genocide. If the victims are so utterly helpless, they become less human and their extinction more likely regardless of whether colonisation contributes to it or not.

As we see, many of the films in the corpus tend to perpetuate the noble savage myth to some degree, using the myth to colour their portrayal of indigenous populations. The result is frequent misrepresentation of the non-European cultures. Many of the white major characters show contempt for the indigenous characters precisely because these characters have been represented as helpless and likely to die anyway. This point of view is even stated explicitly by Sergeant Farrell in The Chant of
Jimmie Blacksmith. The combined effect of matching the noble savage on the verge of dying out to the dismissive attitude of the new colonisers is powerful and may risk leaving contemporary viewers convinced of its truth.

The Pattern of Darkness

We have been examining the way symbolism operates at the narrative level through the frequent use of a journey, and in the use of archetypes such as the orphan and the noble savage in the representation of characters. There is a further level at which symbolism operates, and this is in the use of lighting. There is a striking frequency of scenes taking place at night and, given the symbolic associations of darkness, it must make a significant contribution to the filmic representation of the colonial past.

Darkness holds an incredibly strong and universal symbolism, linked to death, anxiety, depression, evil, chaos and any number of other negative valorisations. The night is associated with mysterious darkness, fear, the ineffable, the imperceptible. Gilbert Durand discusses the likely psychological origins for this negative symbolic response to darkness:

For example, the approach of the twilight hour has always placed the human soul in this psychological situation. Lucretius in *De rerum natura* depicts our ancestors’ terror at the approach of night, and in the Jewish tradition the Talmud shows Adam and Eve experiencing “terror as night blots out the horizon and the horror of death invades their trembling hearts”. This vespertal depression, common to the modern and primitive psyche, is even found in animals. In folklore the moment of nightfall, or sinister midnight, provokes terror; this is the time when malignant animals and infernal monsters take possession of bodies and souls. The fear of dangerous darkness seems a basic component of the imagination of light and day.

With such symbolic potency, we can see how darkness can be a significant narrative tool in cinema: a medium built on lighting. In this section, we will discuss some scenes and sequences which take place either at night or in dark places, with the aim of discovering how this use of low lighting complements the symbolic dimension of the other cinematic and narrative elements. We will also see if the use of darkness has any relationship to activities that were hidden during the colonial period.
One of the French films that we focus on in this study, *Chocolat*, has 30 per cent of its narrative taking place at night: 30 minutes out of 100. All of these are within the 86-minute central flashback segment, therefore increasing that percentage to almost half of the narrative that the night scenes directly relate to. Consequently, a considerable proportion of the narrative is taking place against a backdrop infused with symbolic meaning. The first extended sequence is the one in which Aimée orders Protée to guard her bedroom. She has heard hyenas howling and is frightened. At first glance, it would seem necessary to make this scene nocturnal because of its unseen antagonists, the hyenas. These animals prefer to hunt under cover of darkness. But since the spectator does not even see the hyenas, they are incidental. If the filmmaker wants to show the fear of the white settler for the African wildlife, then any of the large day-time hunters such as lions or leopards could have been chosen. The choice of night is more probably related to the presence of a black man in a married white woman's bedroom. The night may draw attention to Aimée's fear of and alienation from her colonised surroundings, but it also reflects the sexual and racial tension between her and her servant. Furtive relationships between white women and black men were not tolerated in the same way that they were between their opposite genders.

The night setting reminds us of this taboo. Protée is reluctant to enter Aimée's bedroom with only her daughter present. The servant is ill at ease in a domain which he knows he has been forbidden to enter. Aimée is equally aware of the boundaries that she is playing with and this weight on her conscience reveals itself in the fact that she does not give Protée any bullets for the gun with which he is expected to protect her. Although we are not undertaking a psychoanalytical reading, the symbolic implications of this on Protée are glaringly obvious. He is rendered impotent and although he spends the remainder of the night sitting in Aimée's room with the gun, symbol of his powerful
African masculinity, we know it is not loaded. He is not really a threat to the colonial status quo.

This highly-charged darkness draws attention to Protée's own subconscious feelings, which he keeps hidden in daylight, when he maintains the appearance of a perfectly obedient and subordinate servant. We see the first signs of his discontent when he is carrying France on his shoulders in the moonlight. He breaks out into his own language and shouts energetically. We cannot understand the words but we understand the pent-up rage with which they are spoken. Later in the film, also at night, Protée firstly expels Luc, the character who seems to be most disturbing the order of the exemplary colonial life of the Dalens; second, Protée repels Aimée's surreptitious advance and lastly, lets the girl France burn her hand on the hot water pipe in the boiler room. All these highly charged and significant actions happen under the convenient cover of the dark. The colonial order remains unruffled at the surface.

We have also seen the expression of sexual tension caused by social taboos being represented in the night scenes in Walkabout. The gum tree scene is where the tension reaches its first peak. It is noticeably the white girl who does not wish to admit it and, as the scene focuses on her feelings, this explains its night-time setting. The night is the metaphor for the subconscious, for the repressed, for those feelings that the girl does not wish to admit to. She buries them where they cannot threaten her consciously acquired persona of a perfectly well-bred English girl who is rational about all and pronounces her vowels correctly.

We already saw evidence of this use of night in the earlier scene of the first night in the open with her little brother. The girl did not wish to admit to him or, above all, to herself, that they were lost. This fact had to be suppressed and this was illustrated with the striking night scene composed of interlayered images of the characters' dreaming heads being juxtaposed with the alien landscape and creatures surrounding them.
In Manganinnie, the film we discussed in the previous section, the frequency of the night scenes is not as great as in Chocolat, but most of the film takes place in the perpetual shadows of a dense, tall, Tasmanian forest. Even by day, she and Manganinnie shelter in a dark cave, in which it is always night. As we mentioned in the preceding section, the River people are shown at the beginning of the film in a conventional night representation of indigenous people. They are singing and dancing around the fire. This is the sort of representation of colonised peoples that has come down through cinema from the beginning. We see this same stereotypical image in the Tarzan films. In Australia, we saw the same images reproduced faithfully with blackened white people in Charles Chauvel's Heritage (1935) and Uncivilised (1936).

The singing and dancing scene is contrasted directly with the scene of Protestant solemnity weighing down the atmosphere of Joanna's settler family. Christian is juxtaposed against Pagan, and some viewers would feel the latter to be the more appealing.

Manganinnie ends, significantly, in darkness, and this is the darkness referred to in Revelations, it is the darkness of Apocalypse or Armageddon. Manganinnie has died from the infected bullet wound received from the brutal settlers from whom she attempted to steal food. Joanna sets light to the barn and chants a song which she had learned from Manganinnie. When she looks to the sky, she sees strange figures that no-one else sees. We can guess only that these invisible people are the now-extinct Red River tribe. With this added spiritual dimension, the barn is transformed into their funeral pyre.

In Indochine, we are introduced to the unpleasant underbelly of French colonial rule with a night scene. Jean-Baptiste is presented in the daylight of the boat race as the archetypal handsome, ambitious and professional French officer and, no doubt for this reason, he attracts Eliane. Yet concealed behind this façade is the real way in which the
French have retained power over the Indochinese: by the use of fear. On the river at night, Jean-Baptiste burns a boat belonging to a trader on the suspicion alone that the trade is opium. This merciless act, without recourse to French justice, condemns the colonial system in the eyes of the viewer. Because of the symbolic associations of darkness, the viewer also understands the secrecy attached to this side of French colonialism.

Later in the film, we see another scene which shows in more detail one of the darks sides of colonialism - the slave market - but this is not shown as a night scene. Why not? The answer to this is that, instead of using a separation of time (night from day) to imply the division between two separate events, the filmmaker is using a separation of space. Dragon Island is a long way north from Saigon, the icon of French colonialism in Indochina and thus, symbolically, a long way from the focus of attention.

To use a theatrical metaphor, which echoes the light-dark metaphor, Saigon is what we see in the limelight and Dragon Island is backstage: in other words, it is metaphorically in the dark.

In *Coup de torchon*, night is often used also to hide the unpleasant facets of colonialism in French West Africa. But in this film, not only is there the pattern that we are seeing of literal dark being used to connote figurative dark, there are the two “bookend” scenes. These are the eclipse scenes where, at the beginning of *Coup de torchon*, Lucien Cordier is hiding behind a tree watching a group of pre-adolescent African children playing. The sun goes behind the moon in a full eclipse, and Lucien lights a fire for them to see by. At the end of the film, we see what could be either the continuation of this scene, or an alternative, interrupted by the main body of the film. Lucien is now pointing his revolver at the children, but finally decides not to shoot.

An eclipse at any time is a very rare event for a particular geographical setting so the choice by Bertrand Tavernier to film one must have special metaphorical and
symbolic value. A full eclipse produces darkness but, unlike night, it only lasts a brief time: perhaps half an hour at the most. So what effect does this relative ephemerality have? We need to remember also that the main body of the film takes place between the beginning and the end of this scene. The main body concentrates exclusively on the decadent and corrupt nature of European colonial society. The black children are also symbolic in the eclipse scene – symbolic of innocence. Thus we have the children (innocent Africans), Lucien (depraved administrator) and the brief period of darkness (produced by nature). The overall implication appears to put the colonisation of Africa in a broader allegorical context: the European colonisation of Africa will prove in the long run but a brief period of darkness.

Overall, the films make the viewer very aware of the darker side of the colonial act by the fact that it is depicted in the literal dark. Many of the films in the corpus are reminiscent of the Hollywood genre film noir in that they both portray characters - white or black - who are entrapped in some illicit act and their settings reflect their characters’ alienation and guilt. The noticeably high presence of night scenes and shadowy settings demonstrates that directors of postcolonial films are aware of colonialism’s dark side.

To return to the questions we posed at the beginning of the chapter, we can conclude that, narratively and photographically, embedded symbolic structures influence the representation of the colonial past. The symbolic or metaphorical structures are conventions recognisable to viewers and are thus used as tools of interpretation. The structures frame the contents and themes in a way that makes them easier to understand, but they are nonetheless vulnerable to being understood in terms of what the viewer already expects from those structures. It means that the symbolic structures in film, as perhaps in any art form, are equally as important as the specific subject matter they help to represent. They do not serve the cause of historical verisimilitude but complement it,
and we see an example of this mechanism in *We of the Never Never*. This is based on a true story, the autobiography of Jeannie Gunn. But to give a large number of events unity and coherence, Jeannie Gunn herself in her book structured them into recognisable narrative forms, for instance, the journey. This event did take place in real life, but its representation in a story can, if one agrees with Kevin Brown, convey the additional symbolic meaning of white cultural mobility. The other symbolic structures also produced effects which were most likely beyond those consciously sought by the various directors. We saw how the noble savage myth had the consequence too often of reducing the indigenous culture to a level European audiences would have been predisposed to label “primitive”. As a result, the strength of their pre-colonial cultures was weakened and their colonisation seemed more justifiable. The use of the orphan-like character seemed to offer the possibility of giving white audiences an intimate look at black characters but, as in *Walkabout*, also risked simplifying indigenous cultural complexities by distilling them into one neat package: the character. The frequent use of night and claustrophobic settings is a good indicator that, even in the more nostalgic films, directors were aware of the hidden evil of the period.

The filmmakers’ ambiguous attitudes are certainly further revealed by their use of the symbolic structures we have studied in this chapter. In fact, we can see even more clearly just how complex these attitudes are. If we look at the films made in France or Australia during the colonial period, and particularly before the outbreak of World War Two, the attitudes shown are, taken as a whole, unambiguously pro-colonial. By the time we arrive at the post-1970s period, it has become much harder to classify the filmmakers as a group because each of them, as we have seen, varies from what we could call “ambiguously anti-colonial” to “ambiguously pro-colonial”. Where we have a director who broached the colonial theme twice, such as Jean-Jacques Annaud, we find that his political positioning changes dramatically. *La Victoire en
chantant makes a mockery of the pettiness of the ordinary white settler; L’Amant/The Lover is openly nostalgic and exotic. The postcolonial films are a patchwork of pro- and anti-colonial feelings and the effect should not be so bewildering. After all, colonisation of Africa and Australia did bring with it some benefits, for example, Western medical technology and education. In the postcolonial political climate, none of us seem sure about how to resolve the beneficial side of colonisation with its racist, ignorant and exploitative side. The filmmakers, as our collective “barometers”, reflect this sentiment.


3 Beyond the limits of the film, Jeannie Gunn did return to Melbourne after the death of her husband, but the film does not include this return journey or allude to it.

4 Brown, ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 487.


8 Recall that this is not the same George Miller as the director of the Mad Max films.


10 Premier Don Dunstan introduced legislation in South Australia in 1978 which recognised the Pitjanjatjara tribal group’s land rights claim. Don Dunstan had lobbied in 1959 to end the White Australia Policy by deleting the references to skin colour in Australia’s laws. This was finally achieved in 1973 by the Whitlam Government.

11 At least two other phenomenally successful mythmaking Australian films, Crocodile Dundee (Peter Faiman, 1986) and Crocodile Dundee II, (John Cornell, 1988), construct a hero who explicitly acknowledges the indivisible bond between the Aborigines and the Australian land in the first film, and who actively enlists their expert knowledge in the second. Paul Hogan’s Dundee may not necessarily legitimise the Aboriginal presence, but at least he acknowledges that their understanding of the land is necessary for his own survival.

12 On Our Selection is based on the story by Steele Rudd. The first version is directed by Raymond Longford (1920), the second by Ken G. Hall (1932) and the most recent by George Whaley (1995). This one stars Leo McKern of Rumpole fame and Geoffrey Rush who won an Oscar for his subsequent role in Scott Hicks’s Shine (1997). Sirens (John Duigan, 1994) is an historical film set in Australia, but its theme is not colonial. This film looks at moral questions within the confines of the immigrant British culture. In 2001, Rolf de Heer released The Tracker, set in the 1920s.

13 Curiously, although the letter is to Protée’s parents, he tells France that it was to his fiancée.


16 See for example, Karl H. Rensch, “The Language of the Noble Savage: early European perceptions of Tahitian”. In *Pacific Linguistics*, Canberra, ANU, 1991., pp.403-414. Rensch singles out Rousseau's 1749 essay for the Academy of Dijon first prize, He then goes on to claim: “The escapist philosophers of the eighteenth century conceptualised paradise not as a merely metaphysical refuge from the harsh realities of life but as geographical loci which really existed in some distant parts of the world.” (p. 403).
19 The black boy appears on the cover of the video on sale in the classic noble savage posture: he stands on one leg like a flamingo, balancing on his spear, silhouetted against the setting sun. See <http://www.imdb.com>.
21 Cf. p. 37.
23 Gianfranco Bettetini. *The Language and Technique of the Film*. Tr. David Osmond-Smith. Paris, Mouton, 1973. Bettetini remarks at the beginning of the section on lighting: “One could say that the technical ability and the expressive effectiveness of a director's or of a camera-man's work is revealed above all in the lighting. (...) The cinema may therefore be considered a vehicle for signs of considerable expressive effectiveness, which draws its strength from its own illusion of similarity and thus of representation, not to speak of its free recreation, its combination of luminous masses, and its appropriately directed and selected play of light. Light is thus the fundamental constitutive element of the cinematographic image.” pp. 77-80.
Chapter 6

*The Politics of Adaptation: We of the Never-Never and The Lover*

One of the principal aims underpinning this study has been to uncover contemporary views to the colonial past through its representation in film. The aim of this final chapter is to attempt to identify examples of content which have been included specifically to meet contemporary audiences’ expectations of how the colonial past should be represented. In other words, we are looking for the characters and events that have been included in the narrative for contemporary political reasons, rather than for aesthetic reasons.

The most reliable method of uncovering such politically inspired modifications is to compare films which have been adapted from books written during the colonial period. This would provide us with the optimum framework of reference, as the book is a record of the ideology of the colonial period in which it was published, and its film adaptation a record of the more recent period in which it was released. Without a book, or even film (but there are none), to act as a point of comparison, our findings would be much more speculative.

There is a film in our corpus that is exemplary of the other films, as well as being the only film that is adapted from a book published in the colonial period: *We of the Never-Never* from Australia (Igor Auzins, 1982). This offers the opportunity to compare episodes in the book, published in 1908, to the equivalent scenes in the film. Such a comparison will then give us insight into the purely ideological components of the other films. Following the comparison of *We of the Never-Never* with the book which inspired it, we will study
L'Amant/The Lover from France (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1991), whose own unique production history also allows us access to the information we are seeking.

This type of approach is a contextual one, similar to that used in Darlene J. Sadler's study of How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman, the Brazilian film by Pereira dos Santos, released in 1971:

Most commentaries on literary adaptation in film are formalistic, preoccupied with issues of textual fidelity or with attempts to explain the differences between media. From my own point of view, the study of adaptation becomes more interesting when it takes into account historical, cultural, or political concerns.1

Sadler knew in advance that Pereira dos Santos almost always adapted historical texts from the canonical literature of Brazil. Dos Santos used this technique to get past the censors, while indirectly criticising Brazil's dictatorial governments of the 1960s and 1970s. Sadler examines the relationship between the themes in Dos Santos's films and the contemporary cultural and political situation of the period in which they were made and finds a correlation. In the case of How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman, which was released in 1970, the Brazilian director uses the historical story to make oblique comments about the ultraconservative government which came into power in 1968.

Our use of the books and the circumstances of the adaptation of We of the Never-Never and L'Amant/The Lover will provide a context which permits us to identify the postcolonial elements in these two films. We will be looking for the modifications that cannot be put down to aesthetic differences between book and film, but to the differences between when they are set and when they are released. Each film offers a different opportunity according to its unique history. We of the Never-Never is based on an autobiographical novel published in 1908. There are many differences in the film that can only be explained by taking into account the particular political and historical concerns of the year of its release when, for example, the first land rights had been recently granted to Aborigines. By discussing these contextual details and comparing them to the main
thematic differences between the film and the book, we will be able to unveil more fully the contemporary concerns of Australia in the early 1980s in relation to its colonial history.

The history of the adaptation of *L'Amant/The Lover* is very different. Although the book is autobiographical and relates a love affair that took place in late 1920s French Indochina, Marguerite Duras wrote it in the early 1980s and published it in 1984. The film was released seven years later. The situation is different here as Marguerite Duras, unlike Jeannie Gunn, was already a famous author of long standing when she wrote the story of her colonial love affair. The modifications to her story made in Annaud's film are not inspired by the same concerns as those that motivated Auzin's adaptation of Jeannie Gunn's novel. One would anticipate Annaud’s approach to be much more attentive to the author’s internationally established reputation. Yet Marguerite Duras was so dissatisfied with his filming of her *L'Amant* that she wrote a second version, entitled *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. The changes made by Annaud therefore have possibly reflected his own beliefs about the contemporary French audience’s feelings towards their colonial past. Additionally, Annaud had strong commercial considerations, since he made the film in English to attract a wider audience.

*We of the Never-Never: from colonial autobiography to postcolonial film*

*We of the Never-Never*, the book, was published in 1908 and, like the film, tells the story of the entire year 1902. This means that it is our only opportunity to directly compare the same story being told in its contemporary setting and then being retold as an historical story to a film audience eighty years later. A comparison of the film with the book shows that the film has taken a substantial number of liberties with the original text, most particularly with its positioning of issues of gender and racism. It is most likely that the
results of this comparison will have implications for the way we can read all of the postcolonial films studied in the present work.

The book has been through at least twenty-six editions since its first publication, primarily because it has been a long-standing title in school curricula. In general, the story in the book and the film follow the same broad narrative lines. The ending in the film is the first point of difference with the book. It gives the impression that Jeannie Gunn will stay at the station and never return to the city: that is, to Melbourne. But the preface is written in 1907 from Hawthorn, Melbourne. Jeannie Gunn tells the reader that she has full permission from the people in her story to tell all about that year 1902. In fact, we discover that Jeannie Gunn did only spend one year on Elsey Station, before returning to Melbourne for the remainder of her life. She also wrote an earlier novel on an Aboriginal theme, published in 1905, *The Little Black Princess*.

This apparently small detail has a significant influence nevertheless on the overall interpretation of the film by its contemporary audience, as the film's ending implies that Jeannie stays. But in other ways also, the film has been considerably modified from the book. The most obvious alterations to the film story have been made to the relationship between Jeannie and the station’s Aboriginal population, and to her status and identification as an upper-class woman. Critical reception to the film varied and out of the sixteen newspaper reviews Karen Jennings read, she found the opinions “(...) very mixed, ranging from Brian McFarlane’s resounding condemnation of it as a ‘sumptuous bore’, ‘tedious bravura’ and the product of ‘directorial ineptitude’, to more flattering commentaries on its performances, and especially Gary Hansen’s cinematography.”

Jennings’s own conclusion after a six page discussion of *We of the Never-Never* is:

Compared with *Jedda*, *We of the Never-Never* is much more willing to address broader social issues such as land rights, labour relations and miscegenation. Its ambitions exceed its
achievements, however, and the final effect is one of lost opportunity despite its undoubtedly good intentions.\(^4\)

The critical receptions of *We of the Never-Never* suggest that it is not a great film but nevertheless, Karen Jennings’s own opinion permits us to see how she understood that the film was addressing contemporary social issues around the date of the film’s production and release.

The first characteristic one notices about Jeannie Gunn’s book is the absence of the use of first names for herself and her husband Aeneas. Mrs Gunn refers to her husband exclusively as the “Maluka”, the Aboriginal term roughly equivalent to “boss” and herself exclusively as “the Missus”. Added to this lack of Christian names is the fact that Jeannie Gunn and her husband rarely address each other in the book directly. Jeannie records her husband’s dialogue but never replies, usually immediately resuming her narration. Here, he has noticed her day-dreaming:

> “Enjoyed your trip South, little ‘un?’” he said, and I came back to the bush with a start, to find the supper dead cold.\(^5\)

This lack of direct communication has the effect of removing any notion of intimacy in their relationship, and no doubt at the social level, echoes the gulf between wives and husbands still under the influence of Victorian mores. This is in complete contrast to the image of their relationship and of the representation of Aeneas in the film. We can compare the representation of two roughly equivalent scenes to see how the film has completely transformed these two central elements of Mrs Gunn’s original autobiography. At the three-quarter-way point in the film Jeannie joins Aeneas and the stockmen on a cattle roundup. They find a herd of cattle which have long been roaming free and are consequently quite wild. One of the bulls heads towards Jeannie, who is standing near her horse. Her horse bolts and Jeannie, seeing no other avenue of escape, climbs a small tree just in time to avoid being gorged.
The stockmen quickly regain control and Jeannie climbs down. She notices one of the black stockmen, “Jackeroo”, imitating her rapid climbing of the tree to the other stockman, who are laughing loudly. At this point the film and the book are reasonably similar in their depiction of this scene. The difference is in Jeannie’s reaction to seeing herself imitated and laughed at. In the book, her husband comments: “How the missus climbed a tree, little ‘un”, and Jeannie Gunn continues:

In that one swift, sidelong glance every movement had been photographed on Jackeroo’s mind, to be reproduced later on for the entertainment of the camp with that perfect mimicry characteristic of the black folk.

And it was always so. Just as they had “beck-becked” and bumped in their saddles with the Chinese drovers, so they imitated every action that caught their fancy, and almost every human being that crossed their path - riding with feet outspread after meeting one traveller; with toes turned in in imitation of another; flopping, or sitting rigidly in their saddles; imitating actions of hand and turns of the head; anything to amuse themselves, from riding side-saddle to climbing trees.

Jeannie’s attitude is one of light-hearted amusement at the ability of the “black folk” to imitate not just her, but anyone. In the film, her reaction has been altered quite dramatically. When her film alter ego witnesses this mimicking she bursts into tears and runs off into a tent. Aeneas, who had been laughing as well, comes to console her. He apologises for joining in the laughter and tells her that it is a good sign, that it shows that she is being accepted into the outback community.

There are many such examples in the film of Aeneas reassuring Jeannie that he loves her and that she is being accepted into the all-male group of the station. None of these appear in the book. What would be the reason for altering the filmic relationship and personality of these two characters? One possibility is to make the relationship more acceptable to a contemporary audience. In the film, Aeneas and Jeannie discuss and argue about topics in a very egalitarian manner, which corresponds to the ideology of the equality of the sexes, at least in the middle classes, that became prominent at the beginning of the 1980s. In the book, Jeannie never questions any comments or decisions made by the “Maluka”, her husband. Jeannie in the book is very much the naïve, passive observer that
corresponds to the role of a woman of her time. Conversely, Aeneas in the book treats Jeannie very much as a child. We saw earlier that his term of endearment for Jeannie, “little ‘un”, is the only term by which he addresses her. Aeneas in the film, on the other hand, uses her name “Jeannie” frequently, and is always reassuring her about her status on the station as a way of compensating for his embarrassment that she is the only white woman. In the book he mentions her sole woman status only the once, in the opening pages:

“Do you know there is not another white woman within a hundred-mile radius?” they asked; and the Maluka pointed out that it was not all disadvantage for a woman to be alone in a world of men. “The men who form her world are generally better and truer men, because the woman in their midst is dependent on them alone, for companionship, and love and protecting care,” he assured them.

Even on this topic, Aeneas does not talk directly with Jeannie in this brief extract. It is quite obvious from this short passage that women are to be looked after. Because of the period in which she lived, the Jeannie in the book is a much less independent person than the Jeannie in the film, and the film is misleading contemporary audiences in not showing this. The inegalitarian nature of the male-female relationship in the colonial period would no doubt have presented a problem for the makers of a film aimed at a post-Female Eunuch audience.9 In an interview, the director explains his repositioning of Jeannie:

[Enker] Why did you decide to include the opening scenes of the marriage preparations, the advice that Jeannie (Angela Punch McGregor) was getting and the reaction of the city women to her decision to go into the outback with her husband?

[Auzins] To set the theme for the film; to give it an immediate purpose and identity.

Do you think it shows a contrast between Jeannie’s attitudes and the attitudes of the other women of the time?

It certainly shows the attitudes of the other women, and it shows that she is a rebel of some sort. Obviously, it provides a contrast between city and country, and gives a context for the rest of the story.10

We see here how Igor Auzins, from the start of the film, made Jeannie more palatable for the modern audience. There is certainly evidence in the book that Mrs Gunn is a “rebel”. Although she never questions the class and gender divisions of her own society, she does strongly question the treatment of Aborigines and the taking of their country. By
publishing this sentiment in 1908, even as only a few paragraphs within a novel, Jeannie Gunn can be seen as being as rebellious as her situation would allow her.

The original Jeannie Gunn is also very conscious of her class identification as gentry, an aspect played down in the film. This is revealed more implicitly than explicitly, as the following example illustrates after she hired a new Chinese cook, Cheong, to replace Sam:

> Without any discrimination, Sam had summoned all at meal times with a booming teamster’s bell, thus placing the gentry on a level with the Quarters; but as Cheong pointed out, what could be expected of one of Sam’s ways and caste?11

Mrs Gunn draws attention to the fact that the teamster’s bell placed gentry on the same level as the “Quarters”, that is, the station staff. Subsequently, when Cheong introduces the system of “graciously notifying” Jeannie and her husband that dinner is ready, followed by a chanting of the menu, and then ringing the bell for the staff, Jeannie is very pleased. Although she is always eager to be on friendly terms with the station staff, she expects everyone to respect the class differences.

There is also the matter of the household staff. In the film, Jeannie tells Aeneas that she will be quite happy to do the household chores herself. Aeneas tells her that it is not necessary and brings her three Aboriginal women. Jeannie seems very awkward and out of place as she attempts to give them orders to get a mop and clean the floors. When she discovers that she is the only person going back to the house and that the Aboriginal women remain where they are, she is even more flustered. The problem is that they have no idea what she is talking about and that Jeannie is portrayed as equally ignorant about telling them. In the book there is no such scene. The Aboriginal women are competing to be on the household staff and the only problem is preventing too many of them from attempting to work in the house:
So many lubras put themselves on the homestead staff to fill the place left vacant by Nellie, that the one room was filled to overflowing while the work was being done, and the Maluka was obliged to come to the rescue once more.12

Whether or not the Aboriginal women were genuinely so keen to work in the house is not relevant. The point which the film appears to avoid is that Jeannie believes they were, and is quite ready to organise them. Jeannie comes from the gentrified class and sees no wrong in reproducing its hierarchical structures on the station. This means that she does not consider that housework and cooking is to be done by anyone but staff. Her role is to give orders.

Jeannie’s relationship with the Aboriginal community living on the station is also portrayed very differently in the film than in the book. In the film, as we have already stated, she is not only sympathetic to the Aborigines, but empathetic to the value of their culture. In one important scene, a group including her and Aeneas, and white and Aboriginal stockmen, are sitting around a camp fire at night. Present is the Aboriginal Elder, Goggle-Eye. One of the stockmen is attempting to mock the Aboriginal cosmology and encourages Jeannie to ask Goggle-Eye where the stars come from. His response is that “blackfellas made them”. He then asks, “Where do whitefella stars come from?” Jeannie replies: “God made them, not only the white people’s, but all the stars.” Goggle-Eye is shocked at her presumptuousness. The stockmen laugh even more when Jeannie says that she wishes to learn from the Aborigines.

But this scene, like many in the film where Aboriginal culture is foregrounded, does not appear in the book. Another example is in the scene where the same group as in the scene just mentioned are looking for a waterhole. They cannot find one and Aeneas is exasperated that they cannot find water on their own land. He asks Goggle-Eye who replies succinctly: “You own it, you find it.” The point of course is that the land belonged originally to Goggle-Eye’s people and Aeneas’s claim is, to Goggle-Eye, a joke. The
whites have come in and claimed the land as theirs, and they do not know its most essential features. The depiction of the racism inherent in the colonial period is one of the problems that Igor Auzins had to resolve:

[Enker] Occasionally the book is quite patronising towards Aboriginals. Yet in the film Jeannie actively challenges the men’s attitude that the Aboriginals are somehow subordinate. Did you choose that change to make people aware of the prevalence of racist attitudes?

[Auzins] It is not a change we made. That confrontation between Jeannie and the men is described in the book. (...) The book does read as a racist document at times, but we didn’t believe that to be her intention. If we had, I don’t believe we would have made the film. How difficult is it to depict attitudes that are racist and to differentiate those attitudes from the attitudes of the film?

I can’t tell any more. Do you believe that the film takes racist or non-racist stand? I think it shows that the men believe Aboriginals are heathens and subordinates. Jeannie holds a different view at the beginning, intervenes, finds that her actions are only causing conflict, and then leaves it at that. (...) I suppose one of the things that the film ultimately says is that it is unresolved. 13

These dialogues show perhaps the core problem of representing outmoded attitudes. How does a director convey an archaic ideology without it being confused with his or her own? The way chosen by Auzins is for his main character to hold the views of his present-day audience since it will be with her that they will be principally identifying.

Some film scenes with prominent Aboriginal themes do have origins, however, in the book, just as Auzins states above. They have just been expanded greatly. For example, there is a scene early after Jeannie’s arrival at Elsey Station in the film where she is seen splashing around in a creek with the Aboriginal women. They are laughing at her efforts to remain British, signified especially by her swimming in full-length petticoats after removing her full-length Victorian dress. In the book, there is no equivalent episode to the film scene. The closest episode is when Jeannie goes down to the waterhole to find staff for the homestead, not to swim:

I went down to the Creek at once to carry out the Maluka’s suggestion, and succeeded so well that I was soon the centre of a delighted dusky group, squatting on its haunches, and deep in the fascinations of teaching an outsider its language.14

Jeannie reflects on the event subsequently, which provides more insight into her view of Aborigines:
Undoubtedly I had made myself attractive to the black-fellow mind; for, besides having proved an unexpected entertainment, I had made everyone feel mightily superior to the missus. That power of inspiring others with a sense of superiority is an excellent trait to possess when dealing with a black fellow, for there were more than enough helpers the next day, and the work was done quickly and well, so as to leave plenty of time for merry-making.15

It is immediately obvious from this paragraph that the original Mrs Gunn had a much less egalitarian attitude towards the “black fellows” than her film alter ego. There is also a slightly mocking tone behind her pleasure at making the Aborigines have a “sense” of superiority, since the implication behind this irony is that Mrs Gunn considers Aboriginal women inferior.

In the film there is also an entire sub-narrative which does not appear in the book in any form. That is the decision made by Jeannie to adopt the ten-year-old Aboriginal girl, Bett-Bett. Aeneas is against the idea at first, and predicts to Jeannie that “you’ll never be able to train her”. Jeannie responds that she does not wish to train Bett-Bett, she just wishes to give her the chance to have the advantage of growing up in their white household, especially since her father is white.

This sub-narrative is not found in the book We of the Never-Never. It has not been invented for the film, however, but taken from Mrs Gunn’s 1905 book, The Little Black Princess:

[Enker] What about the Bett-Bett character? She is a peripheral character in the book, but a central character in the film?

[Auzins] The film is actually based on We of the Never-Never and The Little Black Princess, which is a children’s book written by Jeannie Gunn. It deals with the same year in her life but looks at the Aboriginals and the Aboriginal girl rather than the stockmen. (...) We have used Bett-Bett as a character to advance our story of black-white interaction. She is a device and a character useful in our attempts to alert the audience to some questions about black and white.16

Thus we learn, only from this interview, that the film We of the Never-Never is a dual adaptation, as The Little Black Princess is not mentioned in the credits. What is interesting about the increased focus in the film on Jeannie’s adoption of the little indigenous girl is that it was done, according to Auzins above, in order to draw the audiences’ attention to “some questions about black and white” yet, two decades after its release, the adoption of
black children into white families has been qualified as one of the evils of colonialism. Since the 1990s, the adult Aboriginal children of these white adoptive families call themselves “the stolen generation”.17 Igor Auzin’s way of tackling cross-colonial relations appears twenty years later to have suffered the same fate as earlier attitudes, no doubt, carried out also with good intentions.

Other, less obvious aspects of the novel have led to criticism of Jeannie Gunn's attitude towards the Aborigines on Elsey Station. In Katherine Ellinghaus’s article, “Racism in the Never-Never: disparate readings of Jeannie Gunn”, the attitude of Mrs Gunn is found to be highly ambiguous.18 This counters the universally favorable critical opinions that the book received upon publication. For example, one opinion of the time that was expressed by Baldwin Spencer was that Jeannie Gunn’s portrayal of Aboriginal characters was “simple, sympathetic and humorous”. Similarly, C. Hartley Grattan uses the word “sympathetic” in 1928, and likewise does Henry Mackenzie Green in 1961.19 As late as 1988, Dale Spender cites Jeannie Gunn as being one of the group of women writers who first recognised the plight of Australian Aborigines, and Spender's argument is based on strong evidence. Her argument is sustained by the following passage from Mrs Gunn’s *We of the Never-Never*:

> The white man has taken the country from the black fellow, and with it his right to travel where he will for pleasure or food, and until he is willing to make recompense by granting fair liberty of travel, and a fair percentage of cattle or their equivalent in fair payment - openly and fairly giving them, and seeing that no man is unjustly treated or hungry, within his borders - cattle killing, and at times even man killing, by blacks will not be an offence against the white folk.20

This paragraph is one of several on the unjust treatment of Aborigines. Gunn’s belief is not just strong but provocative where she argues that Aborigines may be justified in killing white settlers. It is hard then, in the face of such evidence, to justify accusing Jeannie Gunn of being a blatant racist.
How can we regard the film in the light of this comparison? The film has obviously been modified considerably from the original book. In doing this, it has distorted a documented history of colonial life. Mrs Gunn was not a fictional character, and she never approached her life in the manner that the film depicts her as doing. It is not a case of her doing other things than what the film shows, it is just that she did them quite differently. The film has reconstructed a genuine account of colonial life with the effect of showing the main character not as she was, or even as she reports she was, but as Igor Auzins believes that his contemporary audience would like to believe she was.

If the producers of the film had been genuinely concerned with representing aspects of the colonial past which Mrs Gunn may have omitted for reasons of the time in which she lived, then they should have tackled a topic that Mrs Gunn would most likely have been forbidden from doing. Francesca Merlan in 1977 spent several months on Elsey Station researching the language of the Manarayi and Yanman Aborigines. She discovered the existence of oral accounts of shootings and massacres during the time of the Gunns’ residence there. She asks why Jeannie never mentioned these. Katherine Ellinghaus suggests that Jeannie Gunn was probably not told by the men about this part of their job. She nevertheless knew enough to mention the shootings very discreetly. The opinions we have just seen above about white settlement come just after a passage in which the stockmen have proposed a hunt for some “wild blacks”.

The film could have taken up and developed this hidden side of the book, as Jeannie Gunn was unable to do. The result would have surely been a very strong story on the “questions of black and white”. Given the dates of Francesca Merlan’s discoveries, Igor Auzins may have been aware of them, but we can only speculate on what reaction he would have had. One of the obvious problems of studying these films is that we can only speculate on what they do not include in their content. Nonetheless, we can see the sort of
choices that the director of *We of the Never-Never* had before him, and his choice was
certainly not to include anything in his film which would be confrontational. Since the
granting of citizenship to Australian Aborigines in the 1967 referendum, followed by the
first granting of land rights in the 1970s, one could argue that Australia has been undergoing
a slow cycle of reconciliation with its indigenous peoples. Auzin’s film appears to be doing
nothing more than reflecting this reconciliatory spirit. This seems harmless enough, and as
Karen Jennings states, was carried out with “undoubtedly good intentions”, but only by
turning its main character into an anachronism, and by continuing to reassure white
Australians of their past kindnesses to their land’s original occupants. In all, this
comparison has given us a concrete example of how political climates shape historical
representations.

**The Lover: from book to film and to rewriting the book**

Unlike Jeannie Gunn, Duras does not write the novel firstly as an autobiography, in
order to narrate general events taking place over a fixed period of time. Duras prefers to
call her book a “représentation”. Secondly, Duras did not write *L’Amant* around the
period in which the real events happened. The book was published in 1984, over fifty years
later. Thus, we do not have the benefit of seeing how the author actually thought during the
period in which the story is set, as we do with Jeannie Gunn. What Duras’s *L’Amant* does
give us, however, is the author reflecting upon her own personal colonial past from a
postcolonial present.

The book plays with the notion of this relationship between the present self and the
past self, and this is one factor that distinguishes *L’Amant* from Mrs Gunn’s autobiography.
There is a continual oscillation between the first person and third person singular, which
grammatically signals the distance between the Marguerite of 15½ years old in 1929 and
the mature, reflective Marguerite retelling the experience over fifty years later. For example, in the episode where she and the Chinese man first make love in his bachelor’s pad, we see the swing from:

He tore off her dress, he throws it, he tore off as well the little white cotton briefs and he carries her thus naked to the bed. 24

to:

We look at each other. He kisses my body. 25

These syntactic swings are separated by gaps between the paragraphs in which they appear. One also notices from these brief passages that the past tense is used in the third person narration to reflect the temporal distance, whereas the present tense is used in the first person narration to give it immediacy. In the film, Jean-Jacques Annaud uses the technique of alternating between the action, which is the filmic equivalent of first-person, and a heterodiegetic narrator, Jeanne Moreau, who uses the third person “she” to represent the older Marguerite Duras. The narrator’s voice is accompanied frequently by close-ups of a fountain pen writing the words that we hear, to indicate both the distance in time, and the fact that the film has come to us via a book.

The film *The Lover/L’Amant* was released in 1992, a year which saw also the release of two other films set in colonial Indochina. Was there a reason for this sudden interest in this particular former French colony? Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot argue that the three films celebrate an anniversary:

Beyond causes that are too official or too obvious - the thirtieth anniversary of the Evian Agreement, a certain renewal of interest of the public and of the French Government for an Indochina where they might still love us - it is too tempting to wonder if the almost simultaneous birth of these works manifests a return to the colonial idea, of the Empire as a topic and a problem in our cinema and society.26

Ramirez and Rolot believe that, in 1992, the Algerian fight for independence was still too close, and that Indochina had a few advantages which made it ripe for exoticisation:

To the necessary geographical remoteness, one can add in fact the forgotten name: Vietnam and its war have, flying in the face of any analysis and even against any common sense, isolated Indochina
in a mythical and remote time. Indochina, in that perspective, is forever separated from Vietnam a little like Persia is from Iran. It is other, colonial and exotic, ready for regretting and idealising.  

Our task in the light of these contextual possibilities will be to examine the film and decide how it reproduces Duras on screen, if at all. Claude Berri initially contracted the author to prepare a film script when he decided to produce a film from *L’Amant*. But when Berri later hired Jean-Jacques Annaud to direct the film, Annaud decided to prepare his own script. The result of this was that, when Duras realised that Annaud’s aim was to make a commercial film, not an artistic one, she began to dislike her own book, for enabling Annaud to do this:

> Before breaking with Annaud, she told him: “*The Lover* is shit. It’s a railway station pulp novel. I wrote it when I was drunk.” Already, she was thinking up another text which would discredit its predecessor.  

Thus a rewriting of the original story was published in 1991: *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*. This book was written both from the script that Duras had prepared and from a new perspective towards the original events and their retelling. Unlike the original novel, *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* does not follow the conventions of the French prose novel, but is styled more as a hybrid between poetry and a film “treatment”. It also includes much more detail than *L’Amant* and some scenes are consequently quite different. For example, let us briefly compare the scene in the restaurant with the girl and the Chinese lover. This takes place in the evening after they have made love all afternoon. In *L’Amant*, this episode is retold in just three pages, from 60 to 62. As in the rest of the book, there is no direct speech, only indirect. The girl tells us about their conversation. Its topics are the source of the Chinese lover’s wealth, the housing that his father built for the poor coming in to Saigon from the villages and how they live in them, of his time in Paris and finally of meeting her family. She makes the point:

> During the whole period of our affair, during one and a half years we would speak in this fashion, we would never speak about ourselves.
Yet in the film, they do speak of themselves, most particularly of their racial and class differences. They accept that they can never marry, on his part because, according to Chinese tradition, he has been promised to a girl from a similar background; on hers, as she says quite clearly in the restaurant scene: “Chinese. I don’t like Chinese very much.”

In *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord* there is first of all dialogue, unlike *L’Amant*. Secondly, there is a similar dialogue: “The Chinese—don’t much like the Chinese. Did you know that?” It appears that the filming of the book has forced the author to rethink how she originally portrayed those events from her adolescence. We can see from even this partial comparison, how the *L’Amant* in its original form left out quite a lot of detail.

Jean-Jacques Annaud’s filmic rendering of *L’Amant* could be judged as selectively faithful both to the original book and to some of the additional details that appear in *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*. This selectiveness, however, has resulted in the film concentrating almost exclusively on the love affair, divested of most of its context. The film is also produced in English, resulting in what Jean-Pierre Jeancolas calls “a French film speaking English.” This is why we have been referring to it as *L’Amant/The Lover*.

In our comparison of the books and the film, we look firstly at the representation of the native Indochinese population, and then that of the European population. Secondly, there is an examination of the cultural problems evoked by the central relationship between “The Girl”, played by Jane March, and “The Chinese Man”, played by Tony Leung. We will also determine whether Jean-Jacques Annaud has explored the colonial background of Marguerite Duras’s childhood affair or exoticised it to produce what Serge Daney calls “a kind of *Emmanuelle* with a bit of literary gloss”.

The representation of the indigenous Indochinese people in the film is sadly distinguished by the fact they they have no speaking roles. Panivong Norindr criticises the fact that indigenous Indochinese are only part of the background in *L’Amant/The Lover*:
Nonetheless, Annaud’s newly envisioned Indochina resembles only in a remote fashion the one that Duras described in her novel. Gone are the “compartiment indigène” [native compartment] that appeared in Duras’s urban landscape, the Grey prefab council housing that made land speculators like the Chinese lover’s father very rich. Willed away also are the smiling (if “dignified”) natives “so integrated, blended into the background, eternal.” Indochina, for Annaud, is not inhabited by the indigenous people of Southeast Asia. This “ascetic population” is simply viewed in cinematic terms for its potential use as decor, extras, or props.34

Norindr argues that the representation of the indigenous population in the film is only used to reinforce white nostalgia for the colonial period:

The Indochinese colony is merely reconstructed as an elaborate stage where a love affair can be filmed.35

But while this argument may be true about the film, we need to balance the film’s representation of indigenous Chinese against that found in Duras’s book. Let us look firstly for the introduction of indigenous people in Duras’s L’Amant. We find that there is no mention of Indochinese until page 16, when the narrator tells of taking the “native bus” (“le car pour indigènes”) back to Saigon, where she goes to school. Her mother entrusts her to the driver, who lets her sit up front in the area reserved for whites.36 (No indigenous character has appeared at this point.) But on pages 28-29, a paragraph describes Dô, the family governess. We are told of her unyielding loyalty, even after Marguerite’s brother Pierre tries to rape her, and when she can no longer be paid. In other words, Duras’s description endows the indigenous maid with positive qualities that depend on her willingness to satisfy white demands. This is the last reference to Indochinese people in the book, except on page 141, where the narrator wonders if the woman that the Chinese lover married remembers the young white girl with native servants from Sadec.

So the Indochinese people are almost absent from the book. Where are the “‘compartiment indigène’ that appeared in Duras’s urban landscape, the Grey prefab council housing that made land speculators like the Chinese lover’s father very rich, (...) the smiling (if dignified) natives so integrated, blended into the background” of whom Norindr speaks? They do not exist. The housing (“compartiments”) was built for poor Chinese
migrants. These provide the backdrop for the Cholon quarter in Saigon which is entirely populated by Chinese, not Indochinese. Thus, Annaud has in fact remained faithful to this aspect of the Duras story. It could even be argued that, in the film, unlike in the book, we see many panoramic and long shots of the Indochinese people working in the rice fields and in town, as rickshaw runners. The overall impression created by these scenes is of an industrious people who are at one with their environment: in other words, the viewer is left with a better impression of the indigenous Indochinese than the reader obtains from the book.

The representation of white colonials and Chinese in the film is also much stronger than is suggested by critics who claim that the film is nostalgic. It is true that Annaud focuses on the love affair, but he does not do this to the total exclusion of its social context. Duras’s story uses the affair to compare the harsh life of poor colonial French residents to that of its much wealthier Chinese population. There is a great deal of irony in the way that the poor French, embodied in the girl’s family, still see themselves as superior to the Chinese. Less explicit, but still apparent, is the fact that most of the Chinese migrants are also poor. These are the people who live in the cheap housing of the Chinese lover’s father.

Much of the film shows us the despicable home life that the girl had to suffer. Her older brother was so addicted to smoking opium that he stole from his mother and ran up debts at the dens. He was relentlessly cruel to the younger Pierre and to Marguerite, who is not named in the film. The film also introduces a scene to highlight the history of her mother and the way she was cheated by the colonial administration. This theme does not appear in the book, but has been written about by Marguerite Duras much earlier in her career, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, published in 1950, and in 1987, as the play *Éden Cinéma*. *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* also inspired the first adaptation of a Duras book: *Barrage contre le Pacifique* was directed by René Clément in 1958. Jean-Jacques Annaud
appears to have seen the importance of the older work in completing the historical colonial setting. In the scene that he introduces into the film, the girl and her Chinese lover visit the wretched plot of land that her mother bought on the coast of the Pacific and that turned out to be inundated by high tides. The girl tells the lover about how the administration refused to acknowledge their error or outright fraud. The viewer can understand quite easily how at least this aspect of the French colonial project in Indochina was corrupt. The scene also has a synecdochal function in that it implies that what the mother experienced was what the ordinary white settlers experienced. Life in the colony was not only a struggle for the indigenous inhabitants.

The central focus of the film L’Amant/The Lover and the novel, L’Amant, is the affair between the young French girl and the older Chinese male. The age difference is never entirely clear. Consistent with the way Duras often drew attention to the unreliability of memory, the three separate works all differ. In L’Amant, the narrator specifies that she is fifteen and a half (p. 11, p. 16 p. 29 and that the Chinese is twelve years older, thus twenty-seven years old. In L’Amant/The Lover, the narrator repeats the girl’s age as fifteen and a half, and the Chinese admits to thirty-two, thus older than in the book. In L’Amant de la Chine du Nord, the girl is even younger. At the beginning of the affair in this book, Marguerite admits to being sixteen (p. 4, unlike in the film when she says seventeen), and then to being fifteen and a half (p. 8, but towards the end of L’Amant de la Chine du Nord, we find this conversation:

He says:
“Vous want to tell me something . . .”
§. I lied to you. I turned fifteen ten days ago.” 40

The Chinese man admits in the second book to being twenty-seven, so it appears certain that the film has exaggerated his age. The author’s trademark of playing with memory is
also included in the film, through the narration of Jeanne Moreau, whose disembodied voice represents the older Duras in reflective mode. As Jeancolas remarks:

(...) she is the voice that drives the film, that introduces the temporal gap, tempered with the uncertainty of memory, so important in Duras's technique.45

The film introduces us to the girl by showing her briefly in medium shots, and then in a series of extreme close-ups. As she is leaning against the rail of the ferry, the camera runs from her beaded shoes to her face very slowly, in an obvious imitation of a caress. The tone of the film is being set here to anticipate the intimacy that will take place between the girl and her lover. Later in the film, in the third love scene in which the girl is on top of the Chinese man, the camera repeats the extreme close-up procedure to such an extent that the viewer can no longer identify the parts of the bodies she or he is looking at. This is a very effective technique for portraying cinematographically the loss of control of the love-making act, the way irrational instinct dominates rational cultural values.

Through the power of these images and their subsequent editing, the film draws much more attention to the physical acts that take place between the girl and the Chinese man but, nevertheless, the depiction of the sexual activity takes only twenty minutes out of the total running time of about 110 minutes. The rest of the time is spent on representing the consequences of the affair, given the class and racial differences.

The latter concern is brought to our attention at the moment of the initial meeting of the two lovers on the ferry. The Chinese man’s first dialogue, after his offer of a cigarette and her subsequent refusal, is to comment on how unusual it is to see a white girl riding alone on a native bus. Then when she finds out that he lives in one of the large houses on the edge of her home town of Sadec, she says: “But they’re Chinese.” His reply, which suggests his surprise that she has not noticed his looks is: “I am . . . Chinese.”
Early in the film, it becomes evident that three cultural elements threaten the long-term duration of the affair. Firstly, the racial difference; secondly, the age difference; and lastly, the difference in wealth. The racial hierarchy in the French colony places French people above all others, irrespective of whether they are indigenous or from another culture. This means that the girl will not be intimidated by the wealth of the Chinese because she is aware that, no matter what he does, or how much he owns, he is not French. The age difference is less important than the racial one, but it does influence the affair at the end of the story. The girl must still obey her mother so she follows her family back to France and thus the affair ends. The difference in wealth is more of an internal class issue. It is a factor considered by families when organising marriages for their offspring.

We see the operation of the two separate class structures in *The Lover/L'Amant*. The Chinese lover explains to the girl that his family has chosen a wife for him who matches their financial and social position, and that it would be unthinkable for him to break that tradition and marry a white girl. Conversely, when the Chinese takes the girl’s family to the same expensive restaurant in Cholon, even though he pays, the family members do not thank him, or even speak to him, simply because they refuse to accept that he is other than inferior to them. Neither culture is able to accept the other as equal in status. They can define their differences only in an ethnocentric manner: that is, by maintaining their own cultures as superior and as the norm against which others are compared. At the end of the restaurant scene the mother laughs uncontrollably. She is obviously amused by the situation in which she finds herself. The French colonial administration has made her poor, while giving her a privileged racial status, yet the immigrant Chinese family has amassed a fortune, despite being seen as inferior.

The Chinese lover reveals how he is affected by his own sense of inferiority. He reveals that he lived for three years in Paris. Despite his superficial pride in being Chinese,
he did not elect to study in the Chinese capital, Beijing, but in the French capital. The fact that he did not succeed in his studies is also indicative of his uncertainty about his cultural identity. He is forced financially, if nothing else, to accept the marriage conditions imposed by his parents. He is unemployed and does not like to talk about money. We get the impression that he would be unable to make his own fortune or earn his own living and is without any professional skills.

The story behind the books and the film then implies ultimately that, from the class and racial point of view, the French are superior. It does this by going one step further than just comparing the two cultures’ prejudices against each other. At this level, they are virtually equal, because there is no objective way of valuing cultures. But because the Chinese man is forced into accepting a traditional destiny, he is forced into a static position, and since he also symbolises the Chinese culture in the story, this is also fixed. On the other hand, French culture is shown as movable, therefore flexible and adaptable. The French family is poor but they leave Indochina and go back to France. This voyage has been financed by the Chinese lover, who pays off the eldest son’s debts as well. It is as though he accepts this mobility of the other culture and supports it while remaining a captive of his own.

Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *The Lover/L’Amant* is then more a representation of the struggle between two colonising agents on the Indochinese peninsula. Neither the French nor the Chinese is shown to be succeeding fully in adapting to their new land. The French family has been duped by the French administration and forced subsequently to live a life of poverty in the colony. The Chinese family has become very rich in monetary terms but must ultimately accept that the governing French will nevertheless always view them as inferior. The love affair between the French girl and the Chinese man acts as a fable to show that there is no chance of the two migrant cultures fusing. Thus, although the film,
like the books that precede and succeed it, gives only a minimal presence to the indigenous Indochinese people, it does not do so at their expense. Rather, they are shown as always working, while those in positions of privilege indulge themselves in love-making, drug-taking and family disputes. The dominance of the Chinese and French presence in The Lover/L’Amant only works to reduce the viewer’s sympathy for their continued presence in another people’s land. Unlike the film We of the Never-Never, there is no attempt to increase the viewers’ sympathy by the use, for example, of a scene showing the main character wishing to learn from the indigenous culture. The difference in this respect is the need for non-indigenous Australians to feel reassured about their continued presence in Australia. The French have no such need in their films about the colonial past.

It would appear at first glance that Jean-Jacques Annaud has adapted Marguerite Duras’s colonial experience with more sensitivity than one would have expected, given that he makes unashamedly commercial films. There is even, in the background, a questioning of the French colonial system and its unfair treatment of poor colonists. The exotic possibilities of the love story have certainly been exploited, but not completely at the expense of its context. The fault of his film, as it is seen by two major French film critics, is that, by simplifying and recoding Duras for a wider, mass audience, Annaud has erased all trace of her from her own story and her own retelling of it. The fault is all the worse for Annaud’s use of the narrator and close-ups of the text being written, thus explicitly linking the film to the Duras book. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas concludes his article on The Lover/L’Amant by suggesting that Duras make her own version:

... if she still has the taste and strength for it, to film (in French, for pity’s sake) her version of The Lover, it would not cost very much. The distribution of the remake into a couple of art house cinemas would not cast a shadow on the Annaud version, but the comparison would become a classic of cinema schools.
Jeancolas is obviously offended by the expense (122m French francs) of a film that identifies with the book it is adapted from, yet is so far from its original. Jeancolas suggests that the book’s own author, herself a filmmaker, could have done a film of *L’Amant* that complements the book for much less money. The other established film critic that we mentioned earlier, Serge Daney, criticises not only the film but the director, Annaud. He discusses the scene in which the viewer is introduced to the Chinese lover by a close-up of his shoes:

(...) Annaud’s work no longer has anything at all to do with memory, sequence, time, montage. This is cinema where there is no communication, because everything is communicated. The shoe is an item from the script which has turned into a surreptitious little advert for an attractive marketable object, a kind of Indochinese Bally, just like all the other promotional objects in the film, from the virgin car to the designer girl.  

Daney argues that *The Lover/L’Amant* is nothing but a series of images which acts as a sophisticated advertisement for constructing a fashionable image. His conclusion condemns the film for its “processed” quality, for treating the viewer not as an intelligent thinking being, but as a consumer:

How utterly pointless it was for Annaud to have shot the film in the real Vietnam. Hadn’t the unfortunate man already ensured there was no danger of accidentally recording a few seconds of unprocessed reality?

The overall consequence of Annaud’s adaptation is that it privileges the aesthetic possibilities of Duras’s story in order to exoticise Indochina and provide an explicit sexual fantasy to the contemporary audience. The time dedicated to the actual lovemaking is relatively small, but the images are overwhelmingly powerful. As a result, the secondary narrative concerning the girl’s family and their problems as settlers has little chance of attracting the viewers’ attention. *The Lover/L’Amant* continually reminds us, by means of the narratorial interventions spoken by Jeanne Moreau, that it relates a major experience in writer Marguerite Duras’s adolescence but, in fact, it has turned it into a myth, or even a commodity, if one agrees with Serge Daney’s argument.
From what we have seen, we could put forward a strong argument that the adaptations of *We of the Never-Never* and *The Lover/L’Amant* appear to have been conceived by their respective filmmakers in order to reassure their contemporary audiences that their colonial pasts can be seen in a positive light. In the case of *We of the Never-Never*, there is a transformation of Jeannie Gunn into an independent contemporary woman who is against racial discrimination. This has the effect of reassuring the contemporary Australian audience that this was how race (and gender, in this case) relations with the Aborigines always were. The white Australians feel that their continued presence in the Aboriginal land is justified. This attempt at reassurance is equally visible in the French film. The mass French audience (and even more so, the English language one) is reassured that their nation’s presence in Indochina was, at the very least, harmless. The background scenes of Vietnamese / Indochinese people at work in their rice fields imply that they have not been disturbed. The romantic affair between a French girl and a Chinese man is, as a result, detached from the Indochinese people and seems to take place in an insular, tropical hideaway, which ultimately could be anywhere. Because both films come from books, we have the advantage of comparison. Both films modified their textual originals considerably, but not because of differences between literature and cinema. These modifications were undertaken consciously in order to provide their audiences with a much more positive impression of their respective pasts than a colonial autobiography or a recollected colonial childhood would suggest.

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3 Karen Jennings. *Sites of Difference*. South Melbourne, Australian Film Institute, 1993, p. 39
4 Ibid., p. 43.
6 Played by Tommy Lewis, who also played Jimmie Blacksmith.
7 Ibid., p. 176.
8 Played by Angela Punch McGregor, who played Gilda Blacksmith in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*.
11 This quote from p. 507.
12 Ibid., p. 54.
13 Debbie Enker, op. cit., p. 509.
14 Mrs Aeneas Gunn, op. cit., p. 53.
15 Ibid.
16 Debbie Enker, op. cit., pp. 509; 587.
17 This is the description of the adoptive process as it appears on the ATSIC website. “From the earliest days of British occupation, governments had allowed the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, particularly so-called ‘half-caste’ children. The stolen children were raised in institutions or fostered out to white families ‘for their own good’.

The Bringing Them Home report concluded that, in the period from 1910 to 1970 when the practice was at its peak, between 10 and 30 per cent of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. No family was unaffected by this ‘sorriest of sorry stories’.”

18 Ellinghaus, op. cit.
19 Ibid.
22 Mrs Aeneas Gunn, 1981, pp. 184-5
29 A treatment is the stage of script development in which the story is outlined in detail, prior to breaking it up to separate the dialogues. This is also how Michelle Royer sees *L’Amant de la Chine du Nord*: “This text has all the characteristics of a script; it is not one since it evokes the possibility of a future film, hence of another text which would be the real script.” “[Ce texte a toutes les allures d’un scénario ; il n’en est pas un puisqu’il évoque la possibilité d’un film futur, donc d’un autre texte qui serait un véritable scénario.]” Michelle Royer. *L’Écran de la passion*. Mount Nebo, Queensland, Boombana Publications, 1997, p. 119.
30 *L’Amant*, op. cit., p. 62. “Pendant tout le temps de notre histoire, pendant un an et demi nous parlerons de cette façon, nous ne parlerons jamais de nous.”
34 Norindr, Panivong. “Filmic Memorial and Colonial Blues”. Sherzer, Dina (ed.) Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1996, p. 130. There are no footnotes for the phrases between quotation marks, but we will assume from the mention of the novel that they are from its English translation.
35 Ibid., p.132.
36 L’Amant, op. cit., p. 16.
37 Descriptions of the urban landscape are found, however, in Duras’s Un barrage contre le Pacifique, see p. 171 in the Folio edition (Paris, Gallimard, 1978. Folio No. 882.). This novel, first published in 1950, is based on Duras’s childhood and so is very close in many ways to L’Amant.
39 Duras’s mother was a school teacher to Indochinese children, teaching them French. She was given the first plot of land, and she borrowed to buy another. Since the land was unproductive, she had to use her small teacher’s salary to both repay the large loan and support her elder son’s drug habit. This was the source of the family’s poverty. For more information on the story of Duras’s mother, see Adler, op. cit., Chapter One, “Les Racines de l’enfance”, pp. 17-73.
41 Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, op. cit., p. 52. “(...) elle est la voix qui pilote le film, qui introduit l’écart temporel, nuancé de l’incertitude de la mémoire, si importants dans la mécanique durassienne.” Tr. John Emerson.
42 Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, op. cit., p. 53. “(...) si elle en a encore le goût et la force, de tourner (en français, de grâce) sa version de L’Amant, ça ne doit pas coûter très cher. L’exploitation du remake dans deux salles art et essai ne ferait pas ombre à la version Annaud, mais la comparaison des deux pourrait devenir un classique des écoles de cinéma.” Tr. John Emerson.
43 Serge Daney, op. cit., p. 16.
44 Ibid. Serge Daney died just as this article was published, at the age of forty-eight years.
Conclusion

Our principal aim in this work has been to discover how French and Australian societies view their colonial history through its representation in cinema. We chose to examine the cinema of these two countries in order to maximise our findings through a double perspective: the former colonising nation and the former colony where the indigenous occupants make up one percent of the population. In order to reach our hypotheses, we will firstly interpret the overall similarities between the films from both countries, then the differences, and finally the signs of a positive trend.

We noticed similarities across the corpus quite early from the observation that, with only one exception - Burke and Wills - the films avoid narratives that recreate documented historical events and, without any exception, no film dramatises the initial acquisition of a colony. The aversion to depicting historically documented colonial events strongly suggests that filmmakers do not wish to present their audiences with representations of their genuine past, but rather with one that has been imagined. The consequence of constructing narratives around fictional events is that filmmakers obviously have far greater power to adapt them to suit their audiences. In this way, rather than raising questions about the colonial past, the filmmakers can bypass them, as indeed they seem to have done in the films of the corpus.

The settings are, with very few exceptions, in open land not yet showing more than a trace of European settlement: in other words, a primarily pre-colonial setting. The dominant presence of a pre-colonial landscape in almost every film shows a desire to narratively colonise territories that are yet to have any cultural significance for Europeans. The films do not directly represent the arrival of a coloniser on to new territory yet, in a systematic fashion, each film cinematographically colonises new
territory, thus inscribing it into its colonisers’ system of cultural signification. This phenomenon is responding perhaps to a need in the audiences of both France and Australia to be able better to relate to the lands that their ancestors acquired.

Personal relationships that take place over the course of the film’s narrative will be shown to end permanently, without exception, which implies that filmmakers see no long-lasting future harmony between the colonised peoples and their colonisers. *Indochine* is the only film in which an interracial romance produces a child, but this child is taken back to Europe by his French adoptive mother, thus preventing the continuity his remaining in Indochina may have symbolised. In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, the title character’s wife gives birth to a son obviously of a white father, which has the effect of cutting out the Aborigines from Australia’s long-term future.

The films will show very few details of the indigenous peoples’ private lives, concentrating instead on those of the white communities. The bias produced by the minimal representation of indigenous communities on the screen has the effect of implicitly keeping these communities in the realm of the Other. Giving little or no screen time to the details of their particular lifestyles and perspectives reduces their representation to a superficial one. As a consequence, the audience is led to believe that the cultures of the colonised peoples are comparatively simple. The second problem resulting from this imbalance in screen time is that, when the audience does see indigenous characters, they are in either the private space of a white character, or in the public space claimed by the colonising nation. The resulting feeling of displacement and lack of identification within this space, in comparison to the confident attitude of the white characters, reinforces the idea that the colonised needed the coloniser.

Elements such as the selectivity of the periods, the mythologising of landscapes, the permanent breakdown in cross-colonial relationships and the predominance of white characters do not necessarily derive from conscious representations of a pro-colonial
attitude, but do end up privileging the white perspective on colonialism. The combination of this bias with characters with good intentions towards the colonised peoples reveals the ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes of the filmmakers towards the colonial past, and these anomalous attitudes are reproduced in the symbolic structures found in the films. The journey in the Australian films made by white characters towards the indigenous culture shows the desire to understand it, but also risks implying that the white culture is the more adaptable one. On the other hand, in the French films, the journey back to France shows the retreat of the invader and the indigenous peoples’ cultures remaining intact. The noble savage character also has always been an ambiguous one, even if naïve. It would not be possible to argue, as a result, that the postcolonial films of France and Australia are justifying or defending colonialism. Yet, with the exception of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith and Coup de torchon, neither is the postcolonial film openly anti-colonial. What the comparison of We of the Never-Never with its antecedent autobiography showed us, was that the representation of an historical figure such as Jeannie Gunn had to be modified to make her attitude towards Aborigines conform with the contemporary one. The reason for this is no doubt to avoid allowing the film to reproduce the racist attitudes of Jeannie Gunn’s period, but the consequence of so altering history is to reassure viewers that colonists were not racist. The portrayal of white colonial characters holding views more in line with the release date of the film is a clue that a director is placing contemporary political concerns of the present before accurate representations of the past.

One fundamental difference that should not be overlooked between the representation of the colonial past in French and Australian cinema is the proportion of films on this theme. Around seven times as many films on the colonial theme are produced in Australia, which reflects its historical concerns as a former British colony. This higher proportion is also no doubt due to the fact that all the Australian films in the
corpus, except *Walkabout*, were government-funded. This is turn indicates the importance that the Australian government placed on postcolonial films in achieving a national identity in a country that was, unlike France, founded as a colony. The next basic difference is seen in the fact that almost all of the Australian films are set in the nineteenth century. *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *We of the Never-Never* are set around the Federation date of January 1901, when Australia ended its official status as a colony. The consequence of setting a postcolonial film before this date is to separate it from the present. If viewers do see anti-Aboriginal activities and attitudes depicted, they can be reassured this was part of the old Australia, one that is no longer. It is a similar effect to the distancing that an Indochinese setting has in a French postcolonial film. Unlike the Australian films in the corpus, the French films were more usually set in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The French in France are already separated geographically from their colonies, and feel less threatened about a narrative set closer to their own time. The Australian directors, who do not have this geographical separation, feel less confident about a narrative set closer to their own time. The net result is that the postcolonial films of both nations keep a safe distance between their settings and their audiences, by either time and geographical distance, or by time alone.

The case of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is an exception to all the films in that its main character is half-Aboriginal by blood, yet seen as Aboriginal regardless by every other British settler except his adoptive parents. By not having a white main character, the film comes closer to representing the indigenous perspective of colonisation than any other film made by a director of European descent. This enables the film to confront directly the impact of colonisation on Australia’s indigenous peoples with the scene of the schoolteacher tallying the comparative totals of the dead. We could not argue that the failure of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* to win an
audience was because of this head-on confrontation with Australia’s colonial past, because it would be impossible to prove it. But given the record success of its complete opposite, The Man from Snowy River, the film in which Australia has no Aborigines, it would be reasonable to hypothesise that Australian audiences do not like being confronted with such examples of past treatment of the land’s original occupants. From the examples of these two films, it is also reasonable to suggest that the problem of past treatment of Aborigines is too difficult even to broach, let alone to attempt to resolve. This hypothesis is further sustained by the fact that, in 2002, the current Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, continues to refuse to make an official apology to the Aborigines for their past treatment by white colonisers.

Both The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith and The Man from Snowy River have no equivalents among the postcolonial films produced in France. In our chosen corpus, the French have no feature films which go to the extreme of an explicit condemnation of colonisation nor a denial that its colonies were inhabited.¹ This absence of polarisation could be symptomatic of the difference in the range of emotion that can be felt towards colonial issues in France and Australia. The French, relatively isolated in their homeland, are evidently less inclined to confront or deny the impact that colonisation had on their former Empire’s conquered peoples. The Australians, on the other hand, are living entirely within the boundaries of a land forcibly usurped from its owners: thus, the polarisation of their emotional response to details about this process.

The most recent films available for inclusion in our corpus are Les Caprices d’un fleuve from France and, from Australia, The Man from Snowy River II in 1988.² Since the close of our research, Alain Corneau, the director of Fort Saganne, released what must be the only film set in colonial Tahiti: Le Prince du Pacifique, in 2001. In Australia, the huge gap in films set in the colonial past may well have been a result of increasing pressure exerted by Aboriginal groups since the late 1980s. The impact of
the Mabo court ruling of 1992, which rescinded the original claim by Great Britain that Australia was uninhabited, would have brought the colonial past uncomfortably close. Australian filmmakers in particular, for whatever reason, have been avoiding colonial stories. But there are signs of a turnaround. In 2001, Philip Noyce released *Rabbit Proof Fence*, about three Aboriginal girls escaping domestic servitude in 1931; in 2002, Rolf de Heer released *The Tracker*, a story about white brutality to blacks in the 1920s. In the same year, Craig Lahiff will release *Black and White*, based on the trial of Rupert Max Stuart, an Aborigine wrongfully convicted of rape and murder in 1959. One striking thing about these three latest Australian releases is that they are set in much later times- after Federation and World War One. Have Australians become better prepared to face their more recent colonial past after the gap of the 1990s? There is also a fourth film released in 2002, *Beneath Clouds*, by Ivan Sen, that deserves mention. This film has a contemporary setting, and in a way, is a natural successor both to *Walkabout* and to *Backroads*. It is a road movie, like *Backroads*, and edited in a highly stylised manner, as is *Walkabout*. It explores the black-white relationship in Australia boldly and genuinely, without being political or sentimental, and may signal an important turnaround in the way contemporary white Australians are dealing with their indigenous peoples.

We have noted the potentially negative consequences of elements such as the fictional settings, the filmic colonisation of the landscape, the lack of enduring interracial relationships and the lack of representation of black lives and communities. It is important, however, not to forget the positive elements that we noted during the course of this study. These elements signal a trend in postcolonial cinema that was not seen in its colonial predecessor: that is, good intentions on behalf of white directors to reconcile the differences with those peoples their nations colonised. This is not to argue that these differences are resolved, but to acknowledge that there are signs of a desire to
attempt resolution. It may be true that Lieutenant Saganne saved Amajar’s life and not the reverse, but the important point is that his character cared enough about the Arab character to do so. We see similar examples of good will by white characters towards indigenous characters in Indochine, Les Caprices d’un fleuve, Manganinnie, We of the Never-Never and Robbery Under Arms. We see signs of dissent in films such as Rue Cases-Nègres, Indochine, Les Caprices d’un fleuve, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, Manganinnie and Morris West’s The Naked Country where scenes of white cruelty to indigenous characters encourage audiences to rethink their views of the colonial past. Other films go even further: La Victoire en chantant, Coup de torchon, Chocolat, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith and We of the Never-Never openly question Europe’s colonial endeavours. Even if the elements pointing to good intentions are outweighed by those that justify colonialism - more often than not, co-existing in the same films - their mere presence on whatever scale prevents us from reaching the same conclusion as did Abdelkader Benali in his study of French colonial films of the 1920s and 1930s:

The act of colonisation is never questioned, not in its foundations, nor in its practices. 5

We would argue that, since 1970, French and Australian films representing the colonial past have finally begun, tentatively at this early stage, to question the foundations and practices of this past.

1 Not to forget however, that there were the films about the Algerian war: the unique Bataille d’Alger, released in 1966; and La Question, released in 1978, based on Henri Alleg’s account, originally banned, of his experience as a French prisoner.
2 Its television series offspring of the same title, continued to be broadcast as late as 2000.
3 The Tracker was selected for the Cannes Film Festival, 2002.
4 Black and White stars Scottish actor Robert Carlyle in the role of a detective, and has a scene filmed in the grounds of the University of Adelaide.
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1 The French edition was seized in March 1958, the first time, according to the translator, that a French book has been seized for political reasons since the 17th century.
1. MAIN CORPUS
Films released between 1970 and 2000

A. French Films with an Historical Colonial Setting


Annaud, Jean-Jacques. La Victoire en chantant (ou Noirs et blancs en couleurs), 1976.

Tavernier, Bertrand. Coup de torchon, 1981.


Giraudeau, Bernard. Les Caprices d'un fleuve, 1996.

B. Australian films with an Historical Colonial Setting


Auzins, Igor. We of the Never Never, 1982.


**C. Films included as historical allegories**


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**2. PERIPHERAL CORPUS**

Films Released Between 1970 and 2000

**A. French Films with Contemporary Postcolonial Themes**


   I - “Les Lettres persanes”

   II - “Afrique sur Seine”

   III - “L’Imagination au pouvoir”


B. Australian Films with Contemporary Postcolonial Themes


C. French Films with Related Colonial Themes


**D. Australian Films with Related Colonial Themes**


**F. Films by Australian Aborigines**


Rijavec, Frank.  Exile and the Kingdom.  1993. (?)

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