

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

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I give consent for a copy of my thesis to be deposited in the University Library and to be made available for loan and photocopying.

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Abstract

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

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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