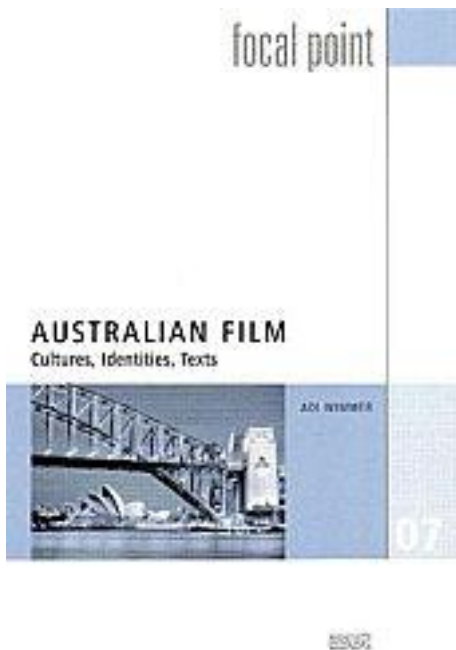


*Australian Film, Cultures, Identities, Texts* by Adi Wimmer. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007, pp. 209, EU26.50 Paperback, ISBN: 9783868210040.



In this study Adi Wimmer draws on the confessedly unfashionable argument that Australia's film industry owes its existence to cultural nationalism, particularly during its 1970s revival under the Whitlam government. Claiming that Australia's nationalism is more open-ended than that of America or Europe, he develops the work of film critics Tom O'Regan and Graeme Turner in 'problematizing' the idea of a national cinema. Wimmer focuses on the narratological dimension of cinema (rather than genre and theme), because studying narrative reveals 'methods of perceiving the phenomena and principles of (cultural) reality' (p. 11).

Although this argument provides the study's rationale and framework, the different chapters, some of which have been published separately, do not always fit together. The textual focus is also somewhat inconsistent; for example, a chapter on the 'cultural cringe' is a general discussion on the role of the heritage film genre of the 70s. Nevertheless, an excellent overview chapter offers contextualisation for the discussion of trends, genres and individual films which follows. Wimmer defines the nationalist core identity traceable to the colonial outback tradition with its polarised responses to the land as ennobling (through testing heroic encounters and mateship) and castrating (the lost child trope); in conflict with the morally degenerate city (in *Lilian's Story* and *Dirty Deeds*); the core peaks with heritage films such as *My Brilliant Career*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, and persists trans-generically into the 1980s and 1990s with films as different as *Crocodile Dundee*, *Shame*, *The Dish* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The more recent diversification of narrative and theme in response to different cultural influences appears in the trend for films about mentally and physically disadvantaged people, stronger in Australia than elsewhere (e.g. *Bad Boy Bubby*, *Sweetie*, *The Piano*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Shine*), a result of second wave feminism's undermining of macho values; in the fashion for 'queer' movies as epitomised in the canonical *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*; and in the resurgence of the larrikin genre in the 90s as a turning away from multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism comes under scrutiny in two essays which examine the experience of migrants and ethnic minorities. Negative or limited representations of Asians in drama and films made by Australians such as *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) and *Turtle Beach* (1992), and the lack of popularity of films by Chinese-Australian director, Clara Law, lead Wimmer to conclude that the Australian collectivity has resisted the Asian presence. And in turning to the multicultural film genre, he distinguishes between the 'feel good' movie celebrating 'otherness' such as *Strictly Ballroom*, and Richard

Flanagan's more controversial film, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997), praised as a challenge to the master narrative because of its portrayal of migrant suffering.

Wimmer writes as a well-informed outsider. His culturally mediated, albeit Eurocentric orientation produces some sharp observations; for example, that no Australian critic picked up on Pauline Kael's observation in 1978 that *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was 'a requiem mass of a nation's lost honour', is to Wimmer suggestive of a nation's 'inability to mourn' then (p. 41). But there are also gaps. New Zealand cinema which evolved in similar conditions to Australian does not get a mention, and New Zealand-born Jane Campion and Sam Neill are treated as Australians. There is no separate chapter on films about Aborigines and Indigenous film-making, despite excellent analyses of *The Tracker* and *Radiance*. But Wimmer is generally inclusive of marginality. His reappraisal of less popular films like Clara Laws' and Flanagan's is timely, while discussions in multiple contexts of key films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Priscilla* demonstrate their centrality to the culture, and are among the volume's strengths.

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