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Beyond Glitter to Grief: Catherine Simpson reviews *Australian Cinema After Mabo* by Felicity Collins and Therese Davis

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'Glitter' films opened (*Strictly Ballroom*) and closed (*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*) the Australian film festival I organised in Istanbul this month a decade ago.¹ But that was before the terms 'glitter' and 'quirky' had become currency in prevailing discourse about Australian cinema. All the other films screened, like most of the films made in the 1990s, bore no resemblance to the glitter cycle. When a phrase like 'post-Mabo cinema' is coined, as Collins and Davis have ingeniously done in *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, a novel framework for engaging with (and unifying) the small-scale product of Australia's (post)national industry is achieved — an industry which, since its inception, has struggled to create a niche for itself domestically.

Since the 1980s, every decade has seen the emergence of a new foundational text with a new conceptual framework for understanding Australian cinema and the ways in which competing and intersecting trajectories of culture, politics and the social are played out in its products. In the 1980s, it was Susan Dermody's and Elizabeth Jacka's *Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, volumes one and two (Currency Press, 1988). Dermody and Jacka adapted Thomas Elsaesser's phrase, 'social imaginary', to discuss the enabling role of film in thinking about Australian society. In the 1990s, it was Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema* (Routledge 1996), which, despite being published only eight years ago, emerged from a vastly different political and cultural milieu from that which currently informs *Australian Cinema After Mabo*.

O'Regan's book revels in the diversity of Australian cinema and has become a foundational text for the theorising of (post)national cinemas, not only Australia's.

Written in a very different vein, *Australian Cinema After Mabo* is the most engaging, useful and comprehensive theoretical text on Australian cinema to appear since O'Regan's. Having published extensively on Australian cinema in other places, both Felicity Collins and Therese Davis are especially well placed to achieve the ambitious aim of this new book — to make manifest the ways in which Australian cinema acts as a public sphere, or 'vernacular modernity', for rethinking settler/indigenous relations. It presents in-depth critical analyses of twenty-five films and traverses across different genres: short film (*Dreaming in Motion*) to documentary (*Mabo — Life of an Island Man*), TV miniseries (*Heartland*) to feature films, although the main focus is on features. Despite the title, not all the films examined here deal directly with indigenous-settler relations, although they do of course have implications for these relations. *Australian Cinema After Mabo* moves beyond those early to mid-90s, quirky Australian comedies to a filmic realm where memory, trauma, aftershock, mourning and grief play a major role.²

In a literal sense all films made post-1992 are 'after' Mabo, the high court decision that overruled the nation's founding myth of *terra nullius*.³ Collins' and Davis's text is, however, at least to my knowledge, the first to signal the Mabo decision as a pivotal moment in the production, reception and rethinking of Australian cinema. Likewise the *backtracking* metaphor they employ is extremely useful in describing how history's unfinished business speaks to contemporary Australia cultural texts. They argue that *backtracking* serves as a vernacular mode of 'collective mourning' in the post-Mabo context (172).

Part One of the book comprises four chapters under the title of 'the History Wars'. The eruption of unreconciled national issues, exemplified through the history wars, has occurred at a time when, as the authors state, “a cinema of national identity seems most redundant” (26). An evocative juxtaposition of Russell Crowe's with David Gulpilil's career opens the second chapter to demonstrate the globalising and localising processes

at work in this national cinema. This chapter takes stock of the limits of the nation and explores the place of Australian cinema in an international landscape. It asks how Australian cinema might be thought of as a genre of international cinema and what generic constraints and expectations might be applicable. As a result, it is very much in dialogue with O'Regan's text. I suspect this chapter will be particularly useful in undergraduate seminars when looking at the sometimes complex question of what constitutes an Australian film.

The third chapter examines the way film and TV policy in the post-Mabo period is shaped by and re-shapes the social imaginary of the nation. It explores the significant role SBSi and the Adelaide Arts festival have played in funding films which are outside or go against the political and cultural agendas of the Howard government, and looks in detail at two films with contemporary settings, *Walking on Water* and *Australian Rules*. The role of Trevor Graham's documentary *Life of an Island Man* in mediating public recognition of the Mabo decision and the faceless (before this film) man behind the name is the subject of the fourth chapter. As Collins and Davis argue, this documentary plays an extremely important part in making overt the violence that non-recognition of colonisation and its traumatic histories perpetrates.

Part two of the book, "Landscape and Belonging after Mabo", is constituted by three chapters, revealing the "unbearable weight of history embedded in the Australian landscape film of the 1990s" (75). The thirteen films subject to in-depth textual analysis are as diverse as the road movie *Heaven's Burning*, Gillian Armstrong's *Last Days of Chez Nous*, Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke* and Dennis O'Rourke's documentary *Cunnamulla*.

While most of the other chapters in the book provide in-depth filmic analysis of two or more features, the first chapter in Part Three of the Book, "Lost, Stolen and Found in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*" is solely devoted to Phillip Noyce's film. The chapter deals with its uptake in public discourse, detailing how it became a focal point for debates over the 'black armband' view of history. The authors read the film through the 'lost child' trope (Pierce) that recurs in Australian cultural texts. 2002 also saw a lesser-known film text

address this very same trope — Rachel Perkins' folk-opera, *One Night the Moon* — which Collins and Davis only touch on briefly (see Probyn & Simpson). Drawing on *Walkabout* (1972), one of the earliest films of the Australian cinema revival, Collins and Davis argue that *Rabbit-Proof Fence* provides a rewriting of this trope: “Unlike the tragic ending of *Walkabout*, where the Aboriginal boy rescues the girl and boy only to take his own life in despair, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* offers a powerful image of Aboriginal survival of colonial violence and subjugation” (143). This image of indigenous resistance is beautifully conveyed through the arresting front cover of *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, which features the familiar publicity still from *Rabbit-Proof Fence* depicting a resilient Molly carrying Daisy, with Molly's gaze directed defiantly at the viewer. Collins' and Davis' analysis of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in this chapter is an extremely valuable addition to a growing body of critical work on the film.

Chapter ten, the final chapter, analyses *Japanese Story* and *Dreaming in Motion*, (a group of short films made by indigenous directors) as well as concludes the book. For me, the analysis of *Japanese Story* is the least convincing of the chapters. One of the most notable aspects of *Japanese Story* for me was its *lack of* overt indigenous presence in the film. Nonetheless, the mourning and grief-work that is undertaken in Brooks' film enables, as Collins and Davis have argued, new kinds of spectatorship for audiences “where the experience of suffering can be indulged, performed and recognised” (176), perhaps as a form of mourning in the landscape, which might be said to be relatively unexplored territory in Australian landscape cinema.

One of the strengths of *Australian Cinema After Mabo* is that it brings together a set of what would be considered disparate film texts, on first inspection, in their subject matter and style. Structurally, I would have preferred to see a more comprehensive introduction and conclusion, with the in-depth filmic analysis left to the main body of the text.

Defining film trends or cycles, as Davis and Collins do here, enables Australian cinema to be thought of a genre, as well as enabling writers, film journalists and viewers to differentiate and describe local product. This unifying process is extremely important in

the context of a comparatively small domestic cinema that lacks a niche. We do need to be wary, however, of disavowing the diversity of Australian cinema product for the sake of creating unity. In doing so, only one dimension of the domestic cinema and only certain kinds of stories, those which fit that paradigm, get taken up by critics. Sometimes the most interesting films, those little gems, fall between the cracks and get snubbed by the majority of writers and journalists, never to be heard of again. To my delight, some of these films such as *Last Days of Chez Nous* and *Vacant Possession* are explored in *Australian Cinema After Mabo*.

Being relatively familiar with the post-revival Australian cinema archive, what I find remarkable about this text, designed predominantly for the undergraduate market, is that it inspired me to think about old favourites in new and exciting ways. I suspect it will become the definitive text on Australian cinema courses around the country for the next few years, which means that it may also set a new agenda for the way Australian cinema is taught. Settler/indigenous relations will be upfront rather than relegated to one week on an Australian cinema course. But it will also be an extremely useful text for anyone interested in the fields of Australian media studies, history, English, anthropology or cultural geography.

Australian Cinema After Mabo by *Felicity Collins and Therese Davis* was published by *Cambridge University Press* in 2004.

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NOTES

1. For an analysis of this festival see: <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/Istanbul.html>

2. The only film that could possibly fit the 'quirky comedy' label discussed here is *The Castle* but Collins and Davis have approached it in a rather different vein.

3. Terra nullius means not only an empty land but a denial of the colonial violence that founded the nation (Collins and Davis 127).

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In *Australian Humanities Review*, see also

- the **Indigenous Issues** archive
- the **History and Cultural Memory** archive
- Frances Peters Little's article **The Impossibility Of Pleasing Everybody: A**

Legitimate Role For White Filmmakers Making Black Films

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