

M00539157NC

T2190 ✓

NC 0017998 1



National College Of Art And Design

Faculty Of Design, Department Of Visual Communication

AN EXPLORATION OF THE NEW WAVE OF AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

By Fionnuala Brereton

Submitted To The Faculty Of History Of Art And Design And Complementary Studies

In Candidacy For The Degree Of B. Des. In Visual Communication 1999.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ruth Barton for all her help in the writing of this thesis, all the library staff for their assistance, and Therese Pilkington for her help with my internet searches. Finally, I would like to thank David J. Orcutt with whom I corresponded through e-mail, for his insight into the world of ballroom dancing.

CONTENTS

Introduction	page 1
Chapter One; A MAN'S COUNTRY	page 2
Chapter Two; THE AUSTRALIAN HEROINE	page 6
Chapter Three; THE BATTLER AND THE UNDERDOG	page 11
Chapter Four; A WIDE OPEN LAND	page 16
Chapter Five; CAMP AND KITSCH ELEMENTS IN RECENT AUSTRALIAN CINEMA	page 24
Conclusion	page 30
Appendices	page 31
Filmography	page 33
Bibliography	page 35

INTRODUCTION

The debate on Australian cinema and its portrayal of national identity within the international market is ongoing. In recent years there has been a shift from more traditional representations of the nation based on land and the 'Outback', to a narrative which is more culturally diverse, and less reliant on a masculine, Anglo-Saxon terrain. I have divided my exploration into five chapters, the first four explore motifs traditionally associated with Australian cinema, those being: a man's country; the Australian heroine; the Underdog and Aussie battler; and the wide open land and its inhabitants. In my final chapter I discuss camp and kitsch elements in some of the recent offerings from Australia, and investigate how these offer a refreshing and sometimes ironic alternative to 'traditional' Australian cinema. Using a variety of references I will illustrate the difference between the old and the "new wave" Australian cinema.

CHAPTER ONE

A MAN'S COUNTRY

When the Australian continent is mentioned, the image that comes to mind is one of a masculine continent, populated by tough, strong, white men. In my mind's eye I see Alf Stewart from *Home & Away* (Australian Network 7), stubborn, of Anglo-Celtic descent, set in his ways, a real 'Aussie' who loves his footie and beer, he is to me the very essence of 'Australianness'. During the 1970s and early 1980s, films were produced portraying men in roles which were perceived as being the essence of Australia's national identity. These films are referred to as the 'Ocker Films', and include: *The Man From Snowy River* (George Miller, 1982); *Gallipoli* (Peter Wier, 1981) and *The Irishman* (Donald Crombie, 1978). In these films we have the typical Australian male; "physically tough, capable of arduous work, quick to respond to perceive injustice" (McFarlane, 1987, 51). He is the embodiment of Australia's national identity, and he is elevated to near myth status. We see strong male professions, such as that of the sheep shearer, a physically demanding but lonely profession, where men are isolated by their work from ordinary, everyday relationships, pursuits and activities. Are we to believe that this continent revolves around these men? All of this focus on the Australian white male as the 'outback' man means that other aspects of Australia lose out. Are they not worthy of consideration for a National Identity?

Much of what Europe sees of Australian cinema follows the idea of it being a man's country, for example, in the Mad Max trilogy, we see Mel Gibson, a lone warrior, overcome injustice by taking the law into his own hands, and resorting to his own method of rough justice. Likewise in "*Crocodile Dundee*" (Peter Faiman, 1986), Paul Hogan in the role of Dundee, out-smarts others by returning to nature and going back to the nation's roots (those of the Aboriginal people), he uses his knowledge and understanding of the land to overpower his adversary. Brian Mc Farlane notes that "the images of men taming the out-doors and of a boy (a country) becoming a man (a nation) are, one is forced to accept, what many people want to believe about Australia" (McFarlane, 1987, page 50). Why is it that these films are what constitutes the bulk of Australia's national cinema?

“ - it is not metropolitan enough to be in the international mainstream of either intellectual or artistic life, and not marginal enough to be exotic”

(Jacka, 1998, 516).

Not only are the urban areas losing out, but the absence of a female lead or at least a strong female role is blatantly obvious. It seems that women on the whole are peripheral. They aren't strong enough, physically, to endure the 'wide brown land' which seems to define masculinity and consequently the essence of the 'Ocker' films. As Brian McFarlane notes, "...few women... have acquired anything like mythic quality. In Australian popular culture and indeed in serious literature, Australian women are most usually standing and waiting serving their myth - making masters." (McFarlane, 1987, 52). What have women to do to achieve a leading role? In the film *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), the wife must die in order to become significant, her death is the catalyst that motivates Max into action. She is no longer in the way of Max (a man) being Australian - strong, "capable of arduous work" and "quick to perceive injustice", she is no longer there to confuse him, or the viewer.

There are many debates on Australian national identity, and as a country it can draw on many influences; the native Aboriginal People, the Anglo-Celtic influences, the influences of descendants of the Continental Europeans, the Asian Peoples, the 'Outback', and the City. Although all these areas are equally Australian, it seems that the 'Ocker' films were the ones that reached the largest international audiences. Personally speaking, Australian films that I saw on T.V. were usually period pieces (from the turn of the century up to the 1940s), surprisingly there never seemed to be many films dealing with or showing contemporary Australia. Consequently many of my pre-conceived ideas of Australia consisted of 'Bush Men' eating 'tucker' around camp fires waiting for the 'Billy' to boil, and occasionally the odd 'Sheila' would be thrown in for good measure. That is why I was so delighted and pleasantly surprised when a new wave of cinema emerged from 'Down Under'. These films break away from the idea that being Australian means being a 'Bush Man' and consequently gave us a fresh new cinema which is still unmistakably Australian. They give us new images and ideas of the nation, and the area between myth and reality, our perception of what we believe to be Australian, will be "blurred in the national consciousness." (McFarlane, 1987, 47). This new wave of cinema, including the films *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliot, 1994), and *Muriel's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1993), offers the international viewer a picture of Australia as we have never seen it before, they have broken away from the traditional ideas of a national identity.

In Allen James Thomas' essay 'Camping Outback: Landscape, Masculinity, and Performance in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*', he argues that such films are worth a look "if only for the apparent incongruity of offering two drag queens and a transsexual as representative of the essence of 'Australianness'". The narrative follows the journey of the three aforementioned travellers who journey across the outback from the city to perform in Alice Springs. This approach is fresh, but still unmistakably Australian. In *Priscilla* we experience a vivid contrast between the principal characters on their lilac bus and the Australian outback. The flamboyancy and outright campness of the principal characters in the outback remind me of Las Vegas - a concentrate of glitter, sequin, and glamour stranded in a bleak landscape of seemingly never ending desert. How can you forget the image of Felicia (Guy Pearce) in 'her' 'Sunday Best', sitting on top of the lilac bus in a giant silver stiletto shoe with silver material streaming behind her in the breeze, performing to her heart's content, as the trio drive to Alice Springs?

In this film we don't have one classic encounter with man and the 'demanding natural environment'; when the bus breaks down in the middle of nowhere, the 'girls' deal with their crisis in their own way. They don't lose their sense of dignity and they definitely don't revert to base animal activities which might involve assuming masculine roles, they open up the bonnet, but they just don't have a clue where to start looking, but they don't let that upset them. Tic (Hugo Weaving) and Bernice (Terence Stamp) sit down to breakfast, Tic has cereal and Bernice has a bowl of colourful 'smartie' coloured hormone tablets, while Felicia takes it upon herself to paint the bus. It is only after they have finished breakfast (after all it is the most important meal of the day), that Bernice sets out in search of help, looking very glamorous in a virginal white ensemble. She does eventually find help, only to have her would-be-assistants frightened off by Tic (aka Mitz) who has changed into a 'little green sequinned number', after which Felicia comments, "For goodness sake look at yourself Mitz, how many times do I have to tell you? Green is not your colour!"

These characters are humourous in the face of uncertainty, they do not let themselves become ruffled by their situation, they see this predicament as an opportunity for a rehearsal for their up coming performance in Alice Springs. These are not typical 'bush travellers', for a start their mode of transport is a lilac bus called Priscilla, not to mention that one of the travellers is a transsexual called Bernice, who was known as Ralph in his pre-operational existence. Allen James Thomas argues that "It's a story about the attempt by culture to impose itself on nature, to mark itself upon the landscape, to subordinate it to the needs and demands

of culture - to stand on it." (Thomas, 1996, page 98). The characters certainly won't blend in with the landscape and so they and their plight are clearly visible to the viewer. He also compares certain sequences with *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1971), and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975); drawing such comparisons with 'Ocker' films links this film with the industry's image of national identity, while taking a new slant on the notion of the 'Ocker Male' as the driving force behind the storyline of any plot. The only significant 'Ocker' male is the mechanic Bob, played by Bill Hunter, who plays traditional 'Ocker' roles in the other two films I will discuss, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Muriel's Wedding*. This character's purpose is to help develop Bernice's character, she truly falls in love with him and is starting to piece her life back together after the untimely death of her former lover. He also acts as a means of comparison for what is traditionally considered to be 'normal', but in this context he seems to me to be old fashioned and dated, although having said that, he is a very likeable character, a 'true gent'.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AUSTRALIAN HEROINE

Muriel's Wedding is the story of one woman's journey of self discovery. She realises this initially through a friend, Rhonda (Rachel Griffiths). When we first meet Muriel (Toni Collette), she is the outsider at the wedding of a supposed friend. She desperately wants to fit in but she doesn't, and more obviously, the girls that she sees as her friends can't stand her and don't want her hanging around. She is treated similarly at home, where her father resents the very existence of his entire family. Muriel steals money from her parents and flees to Sydney, and from that point onwards her life seems to spin out of control, as she tells one lie after another. However, after moving to Sydney Muriel is quite literally transformed into a new person, Marial, she now has a new job and is asked out on a date. She feels that she is definitely on the road to becoming 'Somebody'. As 'Muriel' life in Porpoise Spit was bleak with no definite future. Her family life was miserable, living with slobbish siblings, a clinically depressed mother, and a verbally abusive father. The character Muriel sat in her room listening to ABBA records, obviously depressed herself. It was no surprise that she took the money and ran, what did she have to lose? Her life couldn't have been any more miserable.

Muriel is not the type of character typically seen in lead roles, "she is the dowdy best friend typically put at the edge of a film" (O'Regan, 1996, 243). Why then is she the nucleus around which the story develops? Tom O'Regan argues that the ugliness of characters such as Muriel is a "recurring feature of Australian cinema" (Ibid, 1996, 244), and she certainly epitomises this, as Tanya (Sophie Lee) and the girls say, she wears the wrong clothes, she listens to the wrong music and she is overweight. Muriel is a very interesting heroine, in that she is not 'beautiful', but she may very well be a 'true heroine'. Naomi Wolf argues that "a beautiful heroine is a contradiction in terms, since heroism is about individuality, interesting and ever changing, while 'beauty' is generic, boring, and inert" (Wolf, 1990, 59). Muriel is not restricted by the "boring", "generic" and "inert" qualities of beauty, consequently she is free to evolve into her own idea of her beautiful self. Muriel's journey is not bound by conventions of traditional 'fairy tale' type story lines, where she would marry her prince (David Van Arkle) and live happily ever after; the end. Instead she has the courage to break from the cycle, and consequently her journey of self discovery is not enclosed within the time frame of the film,

she can develop and mature and live her life long after the credits have finished. Her life is only beginning as the film ends. This is a refreshing change from the regressive traditional story line which is typical to Hollywood cinema, where the female must change physically in order to achieve acceptance, and thus become a happier and more fulfilled individual. One example of this is in the film *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) which is essentially the story of a good girl turning bad so that she can 'get the guy', and live happily ever after. In that particular story, Sandy (Olivia Newton-John) was the only individual who required such a dramatic physical make-over to enable her character to develop. Kaarin Lindsay-Dynon stresses the negativity of such a transformation: "On one level, the requirements that a person undergo dramatic physical change to become a whole person, is regressive, particularly given that in the traditional story, there is no room for further change. Once the duckling has become a swan, the possibilities end" (Lindsay-Dynon, 1995, 4). If we are to follow the conventions of this story then the Sandy character in *Grease* will marry Danny (John Travolta) and be a housewife, the end. She has trapped herself in this ending, and convention will keep her there, her character will remain one dimensional and she can never truly mature into a well rounded person. If this is a recurrent problem for female characters, then why have a female protagonist?

In her article 'When The Woman Looks', Linda Williams argues that women have little to identify with on screen, and therefore have little reason to look (Williams, 1992, 563). Although her argument is specific to the horror genre, this argument is true for many other film genres. Traditionally, the female spectator does not have a gaze of her own, and it is the male who is the driving force behind the narrative. The female is just an object of desire. The male in the audience identifies with the male protagonist, and 'projects his look onto that of his like' (Mulvey, 1985, 810), and so in turn, the man in the audience assumes the power of the on screen protagonist. In cinematic history we are rarely offered strong female characters, with whom a female audience can identify. The 'femme fatale' of the Film Noir genre possess a very definite sexual power. These women are aware of the male gaze upon them, and use this sexual power to achieve their own goals. The original 1940s 'femmes fatales' was doomed to fail, as it was detrimental to the male ego for a powerful woman to manipulate men and 'win', consequently, she came to a destructive end. The moral of the story being that bad girls may have fun, but it does not last, and the hero eventually chooses the 'good girl', after he has had his 'good time'. This cycle was broken with the series of neo-noir films; one of the more memorable being the John Dahl film, *The Last Seduction* (1994), in which Linda Fiorentino plays a 'bitch' and more importantly, gets away with it. Although I am not suggesting that all women aspire to to become like the Fiorentino character, here we have a woman that takes

total advantage of the male gaze, and manipulates the man's desire for her own personal needs. This strong female lead can only make way for the existence of a female protagonist with whom the female spectator can identify; one who is independent of the male gaze so that the female spectator does not find it necessary to assume a masculine view point in order to view the heroine. Laura Mulvey suggests that the woman is an indispensable element of the film, but her existence works against the development of the story line, as she "functions on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (Ibid, 1985,809). Muriel is not attractive in conventional terms, she is not an object of desire within the majority of the film narrative. When Bryce asks her out, this action does not "freeze the flow of action" as Mulvey suggests, this action is yet another milestone in the development of her as a new person. The male spectator in the auditorium is not physically interested in her, and so she is less "on display", and more of a driving force.

Although Muriel lives the fairy tale for a while, it is only a catalyst which propels her into the true voyage of her self discovery. She has the strength to reject this fairy tale and become the person she wants to be. Throughout this journey she is confronted by real problems, Rhonda's cancer, her mother's suicide; she not only has to deal with herself and how she relates to others, but also how they relate to her. These are not trivialities, her actions not only affect her but those around her, we can see that she has depth and character as she deals with these obstacles, and that the choices she makes have consequences which not only affect her but those close to her; she has real dimensions, she is not merely a caricature.

Through her relationships with the other characters, and their relationships with each other, Muriel's eyes are opened, and through this awareness her development begins. Initially she exists in a very insular and unhealthy family environment. Her father constantly verbally abuses his family, telling them that they are useless, and blames them for him not getting elected to cabinet. He is embarrassed by them and quite clearly resents them. He is a selfish individual, only interested in his own well being, he is dishonest - he bribes local police to keep quiet about Muriel's shoplifting incident, but this act is not an act of fatherly love, he does not want the family name tarnished. He constantly abuses his position of power (he is a local counsellor), one example is getting free food at the local Chinese restaurant because of a favour he did, and feels that his beneficiaries (including his family) should be indebted to him indefinitely and has no reservations in constantly reminding them of this. In this environment of repression. Muriel had no chance of becoming the type of person she wants to be. The chain of life-altering incidents starts when she steals money from her parents, AUS\$12,000.

She does this in a desperate attempt to be accepted by Tanya and her gang, and follows them on holiday to Hibiscus Island. It is while she is there that she meets Rhonda. Although this would not be considered a 'Buddie Movie', Muriel's timid disposition (which is clearly visible when she first encounters Rhonda on Hibiscus Island, and denies being who she is because she is embarrassed to be herself), is initially allowed to develop through their friendship; when they are living together in the city, Muriel announces that her life is now as good as an ABBA song, it is as good as 'Dancing Queen'

Unfortunately, Muriel's character is not strong enough at this point to survive on its own merits, and so she spins a web of lies, which spirals out of control jeopardising her one true friendship. We know enough of her character to know that these lies are not told out of malice, and most of us can understand her need to cover up her mundane life and to create a new one for herself. Although things have improved for her she still feels the need to truly be a success, which in her own mind means getting married. Underneath the 'New Muriel/Marial' she still thinks like the 'Old Muriel' of Porpoise Spit who looks up to Tanya and her followers. She feels that if she gets married, she is just as good as them. What she is unaware of is that she is using people to achieve her goals. She seemingly is unaware of the emotions of the people around her, Rhonda (who is wheel chair bound and very dependant on her) and Bryce who is really interested in her for who she is. She cannot see that she is a success, that she has real friends, and that she is treated as such. She abandons herself temporarily, for a chance at the fairy tale. This triumph for Muriel (in the role of Marial) is also the low point of her life. She ignores her own mother after the wedding ceremony, and abandons her loved ones as she immerses herself fully in her fairy tale existence. She is rudely awakened to reality by her mother's suicide, which is a turning point in her life. As she is removed from her 'Cinderella' life, she is able to see it from the outside, and she can truly see who she has become. It is through this realisation that she is becoming more like her selfish, egocentric father, that she has the courage to reject the fairy tale and her role as Marial and be true to herself, Muriel.

The various relationships in *Muriel's Wedding* are central to the development of the character Muriel. She sees how her parents are when they are together, how abusive and inconsiderate her father is. She is treated in a similar manner by Tanya and her followers, she is marginalised and ridiculed from all angles. This all changes when she meets Rhonda, who accepts her and doesn't judge her. This acceptance of her by Rhonda is the first step in her becoming a new person. Muriel is obsessed with marriage, she sees this as the ultimate accolade of success, whereas if she opened her eyes to the marriages around her and saw them for what they are,

she no doubt would change her mind. Her parents is a marriage only in name, there is no love on the part of the father. Tanya and Chuck are married, but are constantly unfaithful to each other, neither of these is the type of marriage that Muriel imagines; one of companionship and happiness. Tom O'Regan argues that the relationship between Rhonda and Muriel is almost like a marriage itself.

“Female characters are ‘married’ as in *Muriel's Wedding* (this is, after all, what the two women who leave together can look forward to – the companionability and ordinariness of a life together: in short the traditional marriage)”

(O'Regan, no date, web site)

The life of Tanya and the other ‘Barbie’ girls of Porpoise spit is reminiscent of soap operas such as *Home & Away*, where ‘beach culture’ is the norm. ‘Beautiful’ people populate seaside towns, flaunting their perfect bodies, even tans, and sun-bleached hair, as they parade around in skimpy clothes, acting out their minor crises. These characters are, to a certain extent, representative of the beach culture of Australia, where superficiality is regarded as normality. Tanya and her friends are a perfect parody of this lifestyle, as the film pokes fun at the ‘soap opera’ type characters. Muriel is caught up in this facade and desperately wants to join the ranks of the ‘beautiful’. If Muriel succeeded in this move, which she sees as an elevation in status, she would ultimately debase herself and become an ‘object of the gaze’. The ‘beautiful’ of Porpoise Spit exist for pleasure, the pleasure of the male viewer, and it is only by rejecting this role, and assuming the position of momentum which moves the plot forward, that she can offer the female spectator a view point independent of the male viewer. This rejection of her ‘Cinderella’ role by Muriel is not in keeping with certain Hollywood traditions or degrees of closure, this is a break by Australian Cinema from the mainstream. Although Meaghan Morris has argued that “Film is an industry in a Western Mega Culture. and Australia is simply part of it”(Morris, 1985, 110), this is a welcome change for international audiences, for whom traditional closure has become repetitive and monotonous, although it is still an upbeat ending.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BATTLER AND THE UNDERDOG

Traditionally, Australian cinematic heroes have possessed a Robin Hoodish element, where the Aussie Battler and Underdog fight against authority. This was a recurrent theme in the films of the 1970s and 1980s. These people (usually men) were anti-law; anti-rules; anti-boss; anti-English; and anti-European. Many of these features focused on a narrative structure that was based on the criminalities of the convicts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These films proved popular and consequently films and mini-series for T.V. on this topic were produced. Each production produced a variation or manifestation of the Underdog / Battler image: “....many of the convicts....are often also victims of circumstance. The Ned Kelly story for example, which has been retold in at least six features and one mini-series, typically thematizes Ned’s declaration of war on the police as a natural response to cruelty and discrimination, accidental circumstance, and as a form of working – class resistance to arbitrary authority” (O’Regan, 1996, 94). This disregard for authority is a popular idea, where men express their ‘no one tells us what to do’ point of view. These anti-authoritarian individuals prove to be very popular folk heroes, as O’Regan pointed out in the above quote, the story of Ned Kelly has been retold in at least six features. In the eyes of the nation he is a hero because he stood against authority and paid the ultimate price. One of the more memorable outings of this character was in the 1970 remake directed by Tony Richardson, and starring rock star Mick Jagger in the lead role.

One reason for this embrace of the Underdog and Battler as hero is the notion of the Underdog as mythical hero. Australia is an island made up of people who are descended from many different backgrounds, the majority being from Europe. Their point of origin is not rooted in the continent of Australia as it is a ‘settler society’ or a ‘New World Society’, “where the dominant ethnicity is a cultural hybrid not a particular ancestral ethnic group” (Ibid, 1996, 305). These people don’t come from there and so they cannot locate their historic mythologies in that country, so they invent them in Australia’s settlers who in their eyes performed great feats. “As a colonial nation, white Australia, unlike England, is unable to define itself through myths of origin – we don’t come from here. Instead, we are left to make use of myths of conquest and domination” (Thomas, 1996, 98). They take the deeds of these outlaws

and elevate them to myth status, their anti-law, anti-boss, anti-authoritarian attitude is seen as passion and loyalty to beliefs. Although there has been a move away from depicting colonially oppressed convicts and the very obvious underdog versus authority figures, this theme is still visible in contemporary Australian cinema “..whether the films are set in provincial townships or urban centres or in the future like the *Mad Maxes*, almost all hate authority” (Feinstein, 1997, Web Site).

The love of the underdog is not unique to Australia, and has been a very popular subject for many cinematic features of all national cinemas. Hollywood in particular features this theme in various guises quite regularly, one recent example is *Something About Mary* (Farrelly Bros., 1998), where the ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’ succeeds in dating the beautiful Mary (Cameron Diaz). It is a wonderful feeling to see a feat of achievement where the underdog overcomes all obstacles and manages to beat the favoured party, and although this is a universal emotion, Australia seem to have adopted it as its own.

One contemporary slant on the anti-authoritarian aspect of Australian cinema is the representation of the Australian male in the film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Here we have a protagonist who is not typical, as he is a transvestite. This male role is certainly not conventional, nor are the principal characters, who offer an alternative to the conventional roles typical of cinema. Many Australian stories focus on people who are in the periphery, and Tom O’Regan argues that this tradition has its roots in storytelling; “accentuating the tall story and social type which produce ‘monsters’ and ‘freaks’ who are none the less ‘ordinary’” (O’Regan, 1996, 250). He has argued that because Australia is a ‘New World, Settler Country’ with the majority of White Australians of European descent, their heroes must stem from within their own community, with ‘white Australian’ directors and writers drawing on their mythical Australian backgrounds and incorporating such ‘freaks’ into their films. These ‘freaks’ are a natural occurrence, and indigenous to Australian culture as elsewhere (but as with the underdog, Australian cinema has taken the ‘freak’ to be its own), but are not too often seen in mainstream western cinema. One exception to this was the film *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), here Forrest (Tom Hanks) is another who breaks the rules of convention by playing a hero who is of less than average ability, to all extent and purpose a ‘freak’. Similarly, throughout cinematic history there have been portrayals of , people with mental or physical disability as underdogs, but these were usually cinematic depictions of real life stories, such as the film directed by Jim Sheridan, *My Left Foot* (1989), which told the story of disabled Dublin artist Christy Brown (Daniel Day-Lewis). Another contributing factor to the continued reproduction of ‘freakish’ characters is the documentary: “there is hardly

any aspect of Australian film-making - fictional or experimental - which has not been touched in some way by the documentary" (O'Regan, 1996, 170). The facility available in the documentary to exploit the representation of 'bad news' and focus on it, has picked up on the various unpleasant facets of Australian culture, these various elements can be projected into the mainstream fictional outlet of cinema, showing us the 'Ugly Australian' who is intolerant, racist and sexist. This facilitates the manifestation of our now familiar 'freakish' heroes.

Synonymous with the Aussie battler is the phrase "no one tells us what to do". Although it is representative of the struggle with authority figures, it gives us an insight to the closed minds of these people - to things or people which may be different or new. In *Strictly Ballroom* federation president Barry Fife will not consider the fact that ballroom dancing could develop and enrich itself by introducing new elements. In *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* we see Shirl in Broken Hill who does not want the 'girls' served because they are different. Barry Fife is a middle-aged man, who like a lot of middle-aged (and small minded) people, is terrified of anything new. Instead of showing his fear, confronting and discussing the the new style of dancing, he shuts all doors and encloses himself and all those members of the dance federation into a time capsule locked in the past, in a world where he is boss and no new dance steps can dethrone him. Shirl is no different from Barry, she is afraid of the 'queens' and the change that they represent, she probably associates cross dressing with sexual perversion and paedophilia, and will not let herself or others be exposed to them and their 'disgusting' ways.

The 'anti-rules' idea shines through the mask of camp glitz and glamour in Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992). Here we have Scott Hastings (Paul Mercurio) the young up and coming dance champion taking on and defying the rules of the Australian Dance Federation (ADF), personified by federation president Barry Fife (Bill Hunter). This satire on ballroom dancing is fun and frivolous at first glance. It is choreographed rather than acted and the obsessive characters' lives revolve around the pomp and ceremony that is ballroom dancing. In this story we can see oppression; oppression of talent. The character Scott has done all that he can with conventional dance steps. To fulfil his creative genius and develop as a dancer he must dance his own steps, much to the displeasure of the dance federation. This is the story of a man against the system, an all powerful, corrupt system, where the ruthless powers-that-be will not stop until he is disgraced. "Certainly the story can be taken (as Luhrmann suggests) as a paradigm of repression and rebellion, tapping into the classical myth of the individual against the all powerful system" (Kemp, 1992, 56). Despite the fact that Scott dances across the screen as his statement of rebellion rather than having a shoot-out with the local constab-

ulary, he is still clearly every inch an Australian hero. He possess all the necessary qualities; he is a lone man willing to risk all for his dream, he stands for what he believes even when others doubt and ridicule him, he is the underdog at the dance competitions as the president has the dance results fixed. It seems that he is in a no-win situation, but still his passion, drive, and determination ensure that his Paso Doble is the toast of the Pan Pacific Grand Prix Dance Competition. After his father, Doug (Barry Otto) confesses that he 'lived his life in fear' of what would happen if he himself had danced his own steps years previously Scott realises that he must be true to himself: "in a world where winning means everything, Scott learns how hollow victory can be if the price is stifling creativity" (Berardinelli, 1996, web site). Scott's victory is that he has realised his dream, and that of his father by dancing his own steps. He did not dance at the competition to win a trophy, but to show everyone that restrictive rules stifle creativity and education, in an art form where emotion is the basis for its existence. Scott and Fran dance the 'Rumba', the dance of love, and the 'Paso Doble' a Spanish dance of pure emotion where the man tries to win the lady with displays of his masculinity.

In *Strictly Ballroom* Scott is fighting against the rules of conventional dancing, but Fran (Tina Morice) has to fight against the preconceived notions about her ethnic background. The dance federation is made up of white Anglo-Saxon Australians, she seems to be the only person of a different ethnic origin (Spanish). She is an outsider and is marginalised and patronised by the other female characters. Scott's mother sells her make up and gives her beauty tips which should make her look more like them (white Australians), one of the more memorable moments in the film is when Shirley Hastings (Pat Thompson) who is selling make-up to Fran and demonstrating its application on her, puts some hideously extravagant eye shadow on her which is called 'Island Fantasy' and announces to Fran that it is "so her". The viewer can clearly see that it looks ridiculous on, and that she looks much nicer without it. Shirley is forcing 'white' beauty notions on an ethnically beautiful woman. Tom O'Regan quoting Philip Schlesinger notes that "new world societies like the U.S.A. favour political systems where 'individual rather than group rights' are asserted" (O'Regan, 1996, 320), so Fran as an individual not as a representative of her ethnic people must stand and fight the pre-conceived racist ideas that people have of her. She has an advantage over the 'older white Australian' in that her background is full of culture. Scott Hastings is tired of dancing other people's steps, but Fran has a vast reservoir of culture from which to draw inspiration. She can dance the rigid federation version of the Paso Doble or she can dance her own cultural version of it, which draws its inspiration from the legends of the matador, and reinacts as faithfully as the dance medium allows the story of the Paso Doble. Tom O'Regan notes that some of his friends of 'English' ancestry say that they come from a "boring background" (Ibid, 1996, 362

ⁿ). In this film although Fran is marginalised for being an outsider, we can see that because of her ethnic background, she is culturally superior to the 'older Australian'. The introduction of this ethnic superiority to the dance federation brings about the demise of the tyrannical president, and a new generation can make itself known. Through his new eyes which have been opened to cultural beauty Scott sees how Fran has transformed; although she is still not conventionally beautiful in the old world of ballroom dancing, she is strikingly beautiful in all her ethnic glory, dressed in a beautiful red Flamenco gown, making all the other ballroom dancers look artificial. Fran is not the only character to be accepted into the mainstream community, Doug Hastings (Scott's father)'s re-introduction into society is facilitated by the breaking of the old dance federation. Marginalised years previously because of his disregard for convention, Doug can identify with both the struggles of Scott and of Fran. He is the stepping stone to their introduction to the new dance federation, although he is very much on the periphery, he is 'white' enough to still be seen as one of them (the 'old' dance federation of Barry Fife). He sees in Scott and Fran's Paso Doble the dream he lost years ago and sees in Fran his struggle for acceptance as a serious voice in the dance world. Doug leads the clapping at the Pan Pacific Grand Prix dance competition after the music has been cut and Scott and Fran ordered to leave the floor. He throws them the life line they need to fulfil not only their dream and destiny but also that of himself and Fran's father and grandmother who are similarly marginalised because of their ethnic background. The acceptance of their ethnically marked dancing into the (white) federation, parallels their acceptance into (white) society.

This film offers different variations on the theme of the underdog. Scott is the personification of the new idea, which instills fear in the federation because of the implications of the new steps. Scott speaks the truth when he is confronted by Barry Fife at the regional competition and it is after this exchange that Barry realises that he must put a stop to any further developments:

Barry: "Where would we be if everyone went around making up
their own steps?"

Scott: "Out of a job."

It is his fear of redundancy and the loss of his power which encourages him back down the road of corruption (years previously he convinced Scott's mother Shirley to dance with Les (Peter Whitford) instead of Doug, knowing that the Doug/Shirley partnership were the only couple capable of beating him and his partner. That victory paved the way for him to become

the Dance Federation President).

Fran represents true ethnic origin. The majority of ballroom dancing stems from Spanish and Latin American steps, precisely Fran's background. Her culture, feelings and emotions can be channelled into the existing dance steps and alter them dramatically resulting in emotional movements, in contrast to the watered down imitation dance steps endorsed by the federation. She and Scott together could bring about the destruction of the dance federation.

Finally in Doug Hastings we see a man who has been given a second chance. Through Scott, all of his own ideas and dreams can be realised, and he will not let this chance slip away from him as the last one did (when he didn't dance with Shirley all those years ago, and Barry Fife won instead). The Aussie Battler keeps going, and the person with nothing to lose and everything to gain is a veritable force to be reckoned with. Battling seems to nourish people whom we might underestimate, and these seemingly unremarkable people find a reservoir of strength within themselves and are not only able to deal with the vicissitudes in their lives, but rise above them and become better people for the fight.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WIDE OPEN LAND; THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE AND ITS INHABITANTS

Australia at a glimpse can easily be identified by its landscape. This continent occupies a huge landmass, with its most recognisable landmark, Ayer's Rock, located at its heart. For decades this easily recognisable land has been a trademark for Australian cinema and, like Ireland and its exportation of images of the West and of rural life, has been a central and recurring theme in constructing a cinematic national identity. Geographically speaking this is an inhospitable land, much of which is impenetrable and hostile to human habitation. Consequently the majority of its inhabitants are concentrated in a small area in the south-east. While the majority of land is not fertile or suitable for agriculture, it is rich in minerals, gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, and nickel. Having said that, it must be noted that sheep farming is the most important industry in Australia.

Much of the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s concerned itself with depicting this land in a patriotic way, with many feature films concerning themselves with events of significance which took place in the last century and early in this one. These films concerned themselves with how human life has adapted to this menacing land, and the struggle for survival in a seemingly fruitless situation, as the land seems to resist its occupation. The majority of Australia's population are of European descent, and its indigenous peoples are scattered all over; between cities, working on farms and those who still practice their traditional way of life. These native Australians, Aboriginies, traditionally lead simple lives, having no value on possessions, but taking each day as it comes. With the introduction of Europeans came European values, such as the value of possessions, the most valuable of which is land. This "need" for land meant that they felt that they should occupy, work, and own the land that they felt that the Aboriginies were letting go to waste, and so began the attempt to dominate the Australian landscape.

Australia is quite similar to the United States of America, in that they are both essentially 'settler' societies, and consequently similarities exist. Both tried to dominate the land, the only difference is that the Americans seem to have achieved their goal - the west was won. Although to be fair to those failed heroes of Australia, it must be noted that the deserts of

'Oz' occupy a much greater percentage of the entire landmass than in the U.S., but none the less the 'Outback' was not won. Hollywood cinema has devoted an entire genre to this great feat of domination, with heroic portrayals of such men as Wyatt Earp, Buffalo Bill, and Doc Holliday, not to mention such fictitious characters such as The Lone Ranger and his 'Injun' side kick Tonto. The 'western' is a male dominated genre, with little or no place for women, and at the end the heroic Cowboy gets to ride into the sunset, and men, women and children speak of him long after he has gone. The land of 'Oz', however, does not have such a prestigious list of conquering heroes. The land of Australia will not let itself be penetrated and dominated. At one point in the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Felicia is driving the bus, when suddenly (s)he slams on the brakes, and the three 'girls' bundle out. The camera pans back and we see them stand in awe of the great, vast landscape spread out before them, stretching as far as the eye can see. The three 'queens' on their bus, possess almost a 'wagons west' quality, but instead of trundling across the prairie in a canvas-covered, horse-drawn wagon, they are 'living it up' in their lilac bus, 'giving it loads' to ABBA and drinking as much 'grog' as they can possibly manage as they drive across the outback to Alice Springs. In these circumstances we see how bizarre it is for humans to inhabit this land.

I cannot truly discuss the Australian landscape without mentioning the film "Crocodile" Dundee. This film was one of the best publicity outlets for Australia and its countryside, it brought the impenetrable landscape to people the world over. It is the story of Mick "Crocodile" Dundee (Paul Hogan), a legend in his own life time, who is documented by journalist Sue Charlton (Linda Kozlowski) for a New York paper. Sue travels with him to the outback to photograph the area where he endured the greatest challenge of his life, fighting for survival in 'the bush' after being savagely attacked by a crocodile. Dundee is a survivor, he endured the 'hostile land' and lived to tell the tale. He is a hero. As I have said already the West was won, but the Australian outback was not, could it be that Dundee is the exception to the rule? Allan James Thomas in his essay remarked; "the archetypical Australian explorers are Burke and Wills", he then goes on to point out that they were defeated "by a hellish and hostile land" (Thomas, 1996, 98). Dundee however, was not defeated, he survived. This information is the first piece of knowledge that we learn of him, when we hear Sue explaining to her editor the background for the story that she wishes to write; and so without seeing him, he is introduced to us. He is the 'All Australian Man', a white-Anglo-Saxon, who was raised by the local tribe. This combination of 'new' and 'old' Australian is the perfect blend to personify an all-round 'Aussie'. The fact that he was raised by the local tribe means that he is able to endure the land. This native knowledge has taught him to 'become one' with it, not to try to possess it, to consider it to be his mother, to exist with it. Simultaneously because

he is white, and because of the western concepts of possession and domination, we see in him a man who has conquered the land – tamed it. Western society is unable to come to terms with the concept of co-habitation, land and man together. It feels that man must dominate and own. In him we can see a strong man who is master of the land beneath him.

Dundee is a paradox, he is white but with Aboriginal values. He has never been to a city – in fact he has never been anywhere. There is a comic illustration of his ‘nativeness’ by comparison when his friend Nev (David Gulpilil) appears out of nowhere while Dundee and Sue are talking around a night time camp fire. Sue wants to take Nev’s photograph because he is wearing his tribal face paint, but Nev tells her that she can’t. Sue assumes it is for spiritual reasons and that he believes that the camera will take his soul away. We are amused to hear Nev inform her that the reason she can’t is that the lens cap is still on her camera. It transpires that Nev isn’t a ‘savage’, and in fact he is more cultured than Mick, he isn’t even tribal. He is a city boy and is doing corroboree duty to please his father. He is ‘white’ in his thinking, where as it is Mick who is ‘black’ in his. When Sue asks Mick how Nev finds his way in the dark, he tells her that some people believe that Aboriginies are telepathic and that they can feel their way in the dark. Just at that point we hear Nev banging into a tree and hurting himself, to which he exclaims: “I hate the bush!” This illustrates further how more Australian the ‘white Aborigine’, Mick Dundee actually is, as such a statement could never be uttered by him.

“Nev says nothing about land rights. Nev, in fact, is a model appropriator: the culturally mobile Aborigine, a survivor in transit between tribal and modern life, evading museumification and the closure of authenticity. So, it turns out is Dundee. Already assimilated to Aboriginies by Wally’s tourist pitch, and by didgeridoo strains on the sound track, Dundee now comes out as a tribal initiate and postmodern hero – a “white aborigine”

(Morris, 1986, 117)

Apparently, it is only the strongest of men that can over come this “hellish and hostile land”. At one point in the film, Sue asserting her independence, lays claim to her ability to survive out in the bush, to which Mick replies:

Mick: “A city girl like you? You wouldn’t last five minutes out here love, this is man’s country out here.”

These ‘bush men’ are macho, as Dundee illustrates by surviving his crocodile attack;

“These symbolic wounds of course place the Westerner in a much older tradition of the mythic hero. And the recurrent ritual of removing bullets or arrows from the hero’s body suggests that the aim is principally a test of manhood, of the ability of to endure pain without flinching rather than simply the punishment of the protagonist”

(French, 1973, 118)

This incident only illustrates further how natural it is for him to live and work where he does, and further proves how ‘manly’ he is to be able to endure and overcome such a test of his manhood.

In contrast to the ‘manliness’ of Dundee are the effeminate principal characters of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; these travellers are so far removed from the macho stereotypical outback traveller it is comical. Relatively safe within the confines of their lilac bus they travel across the outback; city cowboys (or cowgirls) getting away from the stresses of city life, who, if we are to believe Dundee’s afore mentioned quote, shouldn’t last five minutes. I have already compared the three ‘girls’ in *Priscilla* to travellers crossing the prairies of the U.S., and have drawn similarities between the American and Australian terrains, and I do feel that *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* possesses some qualities of a Western. In his book ‘Westerns’, Philip French describes the setting; “the burning sand, the oppressive sky, the fractured, enigmatic shards of civilisation which litter the desolate terrain” (Ibid, 1973, 101), which could very easily be a description taken directly from *Priscilla*. They travel for days without encountering human life, the two towns they visit are quite small (on an Australian scale), not to mention the Aboriginal settlement, which no doubt could be described as an “enigmatic shard of civilisation”, but couldn’t constitute a permanent site for habitation. Another similarity occurs in the card playing scene. This scene could have been lifted out of a western. Tic and Felicia are playing cards on the bus, they are sitting across the table from one another. They place their bets, agree on the price and Tic plays his card.

Tic: “Snap!”

The comic twist in the story. Poker, as Philip French points out, is central to the mystique of the western, which is taken very seriously. Here we have two people who could very easily have been in a steam-train carriage or a saloon at the turn of the century, wearing stetsons, with scantily clad women hovering around for luck, but no, these two characters after creating the illusion of engaging in the manly pursuit of poker, comically shatter the facade by Tic’s exclamation of “snap!” Philip French points out that:

“Poker in the Western is at once a deeply serious activity and a marginal one. Success is defined as much by characters as by skill, and personalities are determined by their attitude to the game and the way they play it.”

(Ibid, 1973, 129)

If we took a step back and looked at the larger picture, we would see that, personality wise, these two are definitely more suited to ‘snap’ than poker. They do however take their game seriously, and Felicia’s skill and attitude to the game ensures ‘her’ victory, which results in Tic venturing “once around the main ‘drag’ of Broken Hill in drag”.

Although these ‘queens’ survive their adventure in the outback, they never at any point seemed vaguely comfortable in it. They really didn’t belong there. Allan James Thomas has argued that:

“In this story, the land and the landscape become coded as a site of resistance to white occupation and white culture”

(Thomas, 1996, 98)

Certainly the ‘girls’ have no desire to reside permanent in the middle of nowhere, an area in which they look so alien. Allen James Thomas has drawn comparison between *Priscilla* and *Walkabout* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, in that in these films the existence of human beings in the outback is so ridiculous, and the fact that the characters in *Priscilla* are drag queens rather than school girls or lost children only “serves to heighten the apparent inappropriateness of the figures which occupy the landscape, and to highlight its dominance over them” (Thomas, 1996, 99). The end of the film illustrates this clearly when the three ‘queens’ climb to the top of Kings Canyon in drag. The camera pans back and all we can see for miles is cruel, desolate, barren, but beautiful land stretching as far as the eye can see, in which stand three sequinned figures, shining beautifully in that desolate and barren landscape, so totally out of place. “....The threesome shimmer like tropical fish beached in the desert” (Francke, 1994, 38). In fact the location couldn’t have been better, as Meaghan Morris says:

“The setting is the mythic Australian outback, a perfect Other to the ultimate urban jungle; historically an “empty” (that is, violently depopulated) space for the enactment of colonialist fantasy. The perfection of the outback for this purpose is its supposed “remoteness” from cities (learning, modernity) and, unlike legendary wastes, its “isolation” in the middle of a monster island – prime territory for Darwinian fancies of throwback, remnants, mutants, the (primitive) origin, and the (apocalyptic) end of life.”

And what greater 'mutants' than a transsexual and two drag queens?

The apparent inappropriateness of the 'queens' in the outback, only serves to illustrate how more appropriate it is for them to live in the city. City life in *Priscilla* keeps the 'queens' safe, it is their environment. City or town life in other recent Australian films, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Muriel's Wedding* possess an ambiguous quality, these films really could be set anywhere, they are placed in generic locations. Generic as they may be, they are certainly not boring, they are melting pots for cultures (as in *Strictly Ballroom*, the meeting of the 'Old Australian' and the Spanish-Australian). "The film's makers took the back streets of any town and dressed them up in the most colourful, outrageous and wickedly witty way" (O'Regan, Web Site, no date). The significance of the 'queens' feeling comfortable in the city, is that the city can be seen as a 'white' institution. It protects them, and is their natural environment. The urban area does not need to be dominated to the same extent as the outback, the city's inhabitants do not have to 'tame' the city or forcefully make their presence felt within it. They don't have to 'survive' as they can live quite happily and easily. The city is the 'safe haven' within which all those people whose roots are not founded within the Australian continent can take refuge. Sydney for the 'queens' is their home, it is a 'melting pot' for all kinds of 'freaks', a place where they feel safe and secure. On the other hand, in "*Crocodile*" Dundee New York for Mick is is initially scary, as is illustrated as he tries to walk down a city street and fails to make progress against the heavy flow of on-coming pedestrians, he presses himself up against a wall, and just lets them walk by. For Mick the city is a strange place, not so much because he is an Australian in America, but because he is a Bushman in a city.

There are similarities between the U.S. and Australian in their representation of their indigenous people. Initially in both countries, they were represented as savages, vicious and destructive. This representation has now changed, and since the 1980s when Aboriginal rights rose to political and cultural prominence, the representation of Aboriginals in Australian cinema has changed. The same movement has occurred in the U.S., but much earlier as the Western is a much older genre than its Australian counterpart. The recent Australian offerings have portrayed the inappropriateness of white domination on Aboriginal land through ironic comment ("*Crocodile*" Dundee), and through ridicule (*The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*).

Australia's vast land has the basic material for any number of film genres, and it is quite simi-

lar to the U.S. in its population, as I have already said. It is mainly due to its relatively small population, that many of the films produced must not only appeal to the the domestic market, but must also have international appeal. Although these films are not entirely unique in their concepts, they certainly have an edge which is uniquely Australian. This island is vast, and its people are of different backgrounds, but they place great importance on their land , and how it is perceived.

CHAPTER FIVE

CAMP AND KITSCH ELEMENTS IN RECENT AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

When I first saw *Strictly Ballroom* I loved it, every minute of the tongue in cheek humour, the garish costumes and the excitement of of Baz Luhrman's experiments with camera angles. I went to see this with my sister who hated it. She thought it was distastefully done and garish. What these disagreements about the film boil down to is our difference in taste - that most untangible of qualities that changes with the wind, which we enjoy for discerning what is 'in' and what is 'not'. At the start of his book, 'Kitsch in Sync', Peter Ward quotes John Waters;

"In order to acquire bad taste one must first have very, very good taste"

(Waters in Ward, 1991, 6)

The whole concept of 'good taste' evolved in France in the seventeenth century at a time when the 'high minded' found it necessary to make a clear distinction between what was considered 'good' in literature, art and design. But as philosopher David Hume (1711 - 76) pointed out; "beauty is not a quality inherent in things: it exists only in the mind of the beholder". Today the debate still continues: what is good taste?

"...there has always been on one side the minority of the powerful and therefore the cultivated and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor and and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture or kitsch."

(Greenberg, 1968, 116)

With the intervention of television, the world of 'high culture' and 'high art' has been introduced to almost everyone, so this statement does not hold so much validity as it may have when it was written, over 30 years ago, but although almost everyone has been exposed in some way to 'high culture', its whole essence doesn't seem to have penetrated fully to the general masses. In this post modern era, theoretically high culture and popular culture have been collapsed together. In reality, this is not true. Although artists such as Andy Warhol have tried to merge the two by portraying everyday items in what is considered a culturally elitist

medium of high art, still the desire to 'better' one's self by reading 'good' books or watching 'good' television is still very much in existence. Greater monetary power among people has resulted in a designer age, where ultimately one pays a higher price for a item simply because it bears the name of a certain designer who is deemed to be in vogue. These items may not necessarily be 'high' art, but the works of certain designers such as Philippe Starck are deemed to be works of art in themselves. I have lived all my life in a small town¹, and the small town mentality takes precedence over the knowledge of 'high' art. It does not 'fit in' with the way of life. Many people would consider it a waste of time to visit an art museum regularly and a waste of money investing in the purchase of an original work. Many people may have copies or prints at home - a nice Monet to complement the yellow painted walls in the kitchen perhaps? - The problem with 'high culture' as such, being 'mass fed' to the general population, is that quite often the value of the masterpiece (such as the original Monet) is lowered, and judged on the same level as the reproduction print. So we have true 'high culture' and reproduction 'high culture' or kitsch. In recent times the use of kitsch or the vernacular has become very popular in design for the youth culture. The tables have turned so it seems (well, as far as the youth culture is concerned), and now kitsch is 'cool'.

Recent films which have been exported from Australia, have possessed a kitsch quality, namely *Strictly Ballroom*. These films feature the common man; and how he lives his day to day life. They don't have time for 'high culture' but appreciate what they like. These people surround themselves with trophies; Shirley's house is like a shrine to her son Scott. Not only are the lives of these people Kitsch, but also very camp. In her 'Notes on Camp', Susan Sontag says:

"The Hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance"

(Sontag, 1964, 112)

Although it seems a contradiction that the art of the common man is extravagant, it is in the portrayal of these characters that is extravagant and therefore camp. All of the characters in this film live to dance, their lives revolve around dancing. These are not professionals, they have other jobs by which they earn their living (although you would never guess this judging by their obsessive behaviour).

"The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration"

(Ibid, 1964, 105)

The characters' lives revolve around the world of ballroom dancing; a world of extravagant

sequence, feathers, satins and high heels. The world of ballroom dancing itself is camp. The film is framed with a curtain opening at the start and closing at the end, and so, as the film opens we are told that this is just a show, not to be taken seriously but to be enjoyed. This film originated as a stage play, written and directed by Baz Luhrmann, and it makes no attempt to hide its association with theatrical performance. This film practically celebrates the convenience of the plot and we are never at any point in danger of 'dying' with suspense, but that is the whole point. The beautifully colourful costumes brighten the whole film, now it is the characters who are the scenery.

"To help generate the 'fantasy land' feeling of the interiors, Manson [director of photography] exposed the film for high colour saturation, aided by the use of star filters and other such devices..... In contrast, for the exterior shots - 'their real world' - the same stock is used but over exposed one stop to create a harder, washed-out look."

(Knapp, 1991,16)

This entire 'look' is deliberate, the director wants the viewer to feel that this isn't real, it's just a fairy tale with a happy ending, it's not to be taken as a representation of life. Sontag also says in her 'Notes on Camp' that;

"In naive, or pure camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate and the naive."

(Sontag, 1964, 112)

Strictly possesses all of these elements, firstly all of the characters take ballroom dancing very seriously. This is evident from the opening scenes which feature a pseudo-documentary. We see Scott's parents in their sitting room with his trophies all around them. The caption "Doug and Shirley Hastings - Parents" is on the bottom of the screen. Shirley is obviously distraught, and cannot understand why Scott abandoned the conventional dance steps in favour of his own crowd pleasing ones at the recent State Championship. Doug doesn't seem too bothered, but through her sobs Shirley offers one possible answer to the problem;

Shirley: "Did I fail him as a mother?"

It is all so serious to them, and comical to the viewer. In researching this thesis, I was in contact with an American man named David J. Orcutt, who himself is involved in competitive

ballroom dancing, and he informed me that in reality, those involved in competitive ballroom dancing take their sport very seriously indeed, and he felt that although *Strictly* is a comedy, it is quite a true reflection on the actual ballroom dancing scene. The lives of the cast within the film revolve around competitive dancing, and according to Scott's mother he has been working towards winning the Pan Pacific Grand Prix Dance Competition all his life. This seriousness seems exaggerated to us, and therefore amusing, but because these characters are so passionate about dancing, we empathise with them, and urge them on. These people are driven and one minded, not in a destructive way but passionately and are oblivious to the existence of other pursuits, they are wearing blinkers, they can only see ahead – to the Pan Pacific Grand Prix Dance Competition.

Everything about this film is artificial. The make up and the costume of the dancers, the fact that they don't seem to have any lives other than the one that revolves around dancing. The plot develops through dance, either when they are watching it, participating in it or talking about it. The whole thing is extravagant, and the end sequence is no exception, as Scott glides across the dance floor on his knees, interrupting the competition to perform his own steps with the (now) beautiful Fran. As the curtains close, we know that they will live happily ever after, dancing to their heart's content. Philip Kemp sums up beautifully in one sentence the Camp essence of this film;

“Only in the fantastic world of ballroom could a dancer in a gold-swathed bolero jacket and four inch Cuban heels stand for unfettered simplicity.”

(Kemp, 1992, 56)

It is ironic that the recent Australian film exports are Camp, in that previously the bulk of Australian exports concerned themselves with the land and all things natural.

“All Camp objects and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy.”

(Sontag, 1964, 108)

Not once in *Strictly* do we see Ayer's Rock or a cute kangaroo hopping across the road. These films are getting away from the stereotypical Australian film, and looking else where for a basis on which to provide a new breed of Australian cinema. A lot of this 'new' national identity is based on performance. At the end of *Priscilla*, the 'queens' 'act out' the native flora and

fauna, and even the Sydney Opera House at the end of their show in Alice Springs.

“Instead of the ‘authenticity’ of ‘the man on the land’ we get drag queens, the apotheosis of artifice and pretence astride a bus, operatically miming to other people’s words. Instead of an essentialist masculine version of national identity, what we are offered is *performance* as national identity.”

(Thomas, 1996, 103)

In this film we are offered the very personification of camp – the drag queens, someone pretending to be someone else – as a representation of Australianess. In a country where racism is one of the most problematic social concerns, it is refreshing to see that there is a break away from the old ‘Ocker’ tradition of film, where the white-Anglo-Saxon seemed to be the only true Australian.

It has been noted in many commentaries that Luhrmann felt that the ballroom could be seen as “a metaphor, or microcosm, of the world at large” in which “people’s desires are so passionately expressed”. Certainly the return to the musical (one of the great gay camp icons) is an interesting step for a first time director. There have been few musicals in recent years, certainly not to the extent of those produced in its heyday featuring such stars as Gene Kelly, Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers. Those musicals were derived from the stage musical, and with the introduction of sound to film, the perfect opportunity arose for the production of an even more visually spectacular musical event. In those films people (seemingly) spontaneously burst into song, as they sang their feelings through the ‘dialogue’ in the lyrics. For example in *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevens, 1964), chimney sweeps sang of the joys of their job in ‘Chim Chim Cheree’, and Mary Poppins (Julie Andrews) herself sang of the wonderful effect of the sugar on medicine in ‘A Spoonful of Sugar’. This enthusiasm died with the musical and in the more contemporary musical, it is only those whose professions allow it (dancers and singers) that can dance and sing. Contemporary audiences would be too embarrassed to watch anyone burst into song and proceed to tap dance down the street.

The 1980s saw a return to the musical with ‘musical qualities’ introduced by means of a diagetic soundtrack, in films such as *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987) and *Footloose* (Herbert Ross, 1984). “The main reason that teen musicals have not been considered musicals is the absence of diagetic singing in them, although diagetic dancing is quite common” (Feuer, 1993, 131). This quote is certainly representative of the two afore mentioned films, whose entire stories revolve around dancing. The musical offers a ‘reality’ in a fantasy world. Things may seem bad but we all know that it will ‘come good’ by the end for the final big

dance number. Dancing offers a very expressive outlet, and with carefully chosen music can provide the catalyst or prompt for the desired emotional response from the audience. Not only is this illustrated by the big dance scene at the end of *Strictly*, but also in the ABBA karaoke scene in *Muriel's Wedding*. Muriel and Rhonda perform 'Waterloo' at the holiday resort talent competition on Hibiscus Island and win. The use of ABBA is a very contemporary motif, as in the 1990s we have become very nostalgic for the 1970s, its music, and its clothes. It is ironic that Tanya and friends criticise Muriel for listening to 1970s music, when it is very fashionable (in Europe at least). In their own time ABBA may not have been credible critically speaking, and it may have been quite 'uncool' to listen to them, they now have become icons, especially for the gay community, as is evident in Tic's infamous ABBA routine at the end of *Priscilla*.

Camp and kitsch elements offer us a wonderful new set of binoculars with which to view 'The Land Down Under'. This 'new wave' of cinema is unconventional in its choice of protagonists, and makes a refreshing change from the stuffy 'Ocker' males that were too often seen in leading roles. The 'outsider' is offered a new and contemporary view on what connotes an Australian, as national identity now seems to be rooted in performance, and not determined by battling with land. Australia, the country of which was once said all things cultural could fit on a postage stamp (Rooney in Feinstein, 1997, 2), has become a forerunner in the exportation of ABBA 'cool', with an emphasis on camping it up.

¹ I am not generalising country life, just drawing on my own experiences from my own home town of Daingean

CONCLUSION

The representation of Australia in its recent films has offered the viewer a delightful alternative to the period and 'Ocker' films of the past. Australia's directors are portraying their nationality in performance rather than action. As the problem of racism within Australia increases daily, there is the added problem that within this diverse culture some feel that they are "more Australian than others". With such a problem, instead of trying to please everybody by trying to portray all in each film; it is through fantasy worlds where 'freaks' such as Tic and Co. stand for the norm, that the idea of marginalisation can seem to disappear (however conveniently). We are offered as representative of Australianness those on the periphery, and in them we find our contemporary Australian heroes. This may seem like sticking your head in the sand and not facing reality, but like Aesop's fables there is a meaning behind this story. These films namely *Strictly Ballroom*, *Muriel's Wedding*, and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* are a joy to watch and give us a wonderful insight into contemporary Australian thinking, while still maintaining some of the more traditional motifs such as the Underdog and Aussie Battler, and have revealed to us a more diverse population than we were ever led to believe. This vision is uniquely Australian, for only in King's Canyon could you see three drag queens sparkling like tiny pieces of tinsel on top of a great gorge. Jeanne Chappe sums this 'new wave' of Australian vision beautifully;

"They have a strange way of looking at things."

(Chappe, 1998, web site)

APPENDICES

CORRESPONDENCE WITH DAVID J. ORCUTT

from Fionnuala Brereton breretonfinn@hotmail.com

Dear Mr. Orcutt,

I am a final year student at The National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland. At present I am conducting research for my thesis, which is entitled 'An Exploration of the New Wave of Australian Cinema'. I would appreciate if you could forward any information you may have concerning Ballroom Dancing and the film *Strictly Ballroom*.

Sincerely,

Fionnuala Brereton

(Oct. 1998)

from David J. Orcutt david@theballroomco.com

I can only give you my own thoughts on the movie from the stand point of a competitive dancer. I thought the movie was hilariously satirical, though it seemed far fetched, it would not have been funny if most of the ideas in the movie were not based on truths at some level. Although I don't believe that competitions are fixed to the point where they were in the movie, there is extreme biasedness in competitions. From what I understand through the grapevine, but no definite references who will admit they said this, but we are going through something similar right now in the United States with our current professional American Style Rhythm Champions. They are to some degree redefining the way American Style Rhythm is danced and allegedly the judges are not happy with this. So (again allegedly) the judges have been working for almost two years now to groom a new championship couple. A couple who will give credence to the judges, and not redefine the current style of dance in a manner inconsistent with the judges' teachings. But as I have said, this is all alleged. I have heard these rumours for two years now but of course there isn't any judge that will openly

APPENDICES cont.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH DAVID J. ORCUTT

admit this. The main problem is that our current champions are so far superior to anyone else that to outright place someone higher than them right now would be obvious blackballing by the judges. The gap between first and second place in the United States is a huge gap. That is why they are supposedly grooming someone.

Please let me know if this helped you at all. I certainly hope so, and if it didn't then I'm terribly sorry,

Hope to hear from you soon.

David

(Oct. 1998)

FILMOGRAPHY

THE ADVENTURES OF PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT, Stephan Elliot, 1994

"CROCODILE" DUNDEE, Peter Faiman, 1986

DIRTY DANCING, Emile Ardolino, 1987

FOOTLOOSE, Herbert Ross, 1984

GALLIPOLI, Peter Wier, 1981

GREASE, Randal Kleiser, 1978

THE IRISHMAN, Donald Crombie, 1978

THE LAST SEDUCTION, John Dahl, 1994

MAD MAX, George Miller, 1979

THE MAN FROM SNOWY RIVER, George Miller, 1982

MURIEL'S WEDDING, P.J. Hogan, 1993

FILMOGRAPHY cont.

MY LEFT FOOT, Jim Sheridan, 1989

PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK, Peter Weir, 1975

SOMETHING ABOUT MARY, Farrelly Bros., 1998

STRICTLY BALLROOM, Baz Luhrmann, 1992

WALKABOUT, Nicholas Roeg, 1971

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS:

BUTLER, Judith, Gender Trouble, New York & London, Routledge, 1990

DYER, Richard, Heavenly Bodies, film stars and society, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1986

FEUER, Jane, The Hollywood Musical, London, Macmillan, 1993

FRENCH, Philip, Westerns, London, Secker & Warberg, 1973

GREENBERG, Clement, 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in DORFLES, Gillo (Ed.), Kitsch: an anthology of bad taste, London, Studio Vista, 1969

JACKA, Elizabeth, 'Australian Cinema', in HILL, John, & CHURCH GIBSON, Pamela (Eds.), The Oxford Guide To Film Studies, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998

KIRKHAM, Pat, & THUMIM, Janet, 'You Tarzan', in KIRKHAM, P., & THUMIM, J. (Eds.), You Tarzan London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1993

McFARLANE, Brian, Australian Cinema 1970 - 1985, London, Martin Secker & Warberg, 1987

BIBLIOGRAPHY cont.

BOOKS:

MORRIS, Meaghan, 'Tooth and Claw: Tales of Survival and Crocodile Dundee', in Pirate's Fiancee: Feminism, Reading and Postmodernism, London, Verso, 1988.

MULVEY, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in MAST, Gerald; COHEN, Marshall (Eds.), Film Theory and Criticism, Introductory Readings, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985

O'REGAN, Tom, Australian National Cinema, New York & London, Routledge, 1996

SONTAG, Susan, 'Notes on Camp' in A Susan Sontag Reader, Suffolk, Richard Clay, 1982

WARD, Peter, Kitsch in Sync, London, Plexus, 1991

WILLIAMS, Linda, 'When the Woman Looks', in MAST, G., COHEN, M., BRAUDY, L. (Eds.), Film Theory and Criticism, New York, OUP, 1992

WOLF, Naomi, The Beauty Myth, London, Vintage, 1990

BIBLIOGRAPHY cont.

ARTICLES:

DOANE, Mary Ann, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', Screen, Vol. 23, Nos 3 - 4, 1982

FRANCKE, Lizzie, (review of film), Sight and Sound, Vol. 4, No. 11, Nov. 1994, pg 38

KEMP, Philip, (review of film), Sight and Sound, Vol. 2, No. 6, Oct. 1992, Pg 56

KNAPP, Gerard, 'Can Luhrmann and Co. make 'Ballroom' hip', Encore, No. 94, June 21 - July 4, 1991, pp 14 - 16

THOMAS, Allan James, 'Camping Outback: Landscape, Masculinity, and Performance in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*', Continuum, Vol. 10, Part 2, 1996, pp 97 - 110

WEB SITES:

BERARDINELLI, James, (film review)

<http://movie.review.colossus.net/movies/s/strictly.html> 1996

BIBLIOGRAPHY cont.

WEB SITES:

FEINSTEIN, Howard, 'Down Under on the Up',
<http://www.mg.co.za/mg/art/reviews/97july/10jul-OZ.html> 1997

LINDSAY-DYON, Kaarin, 'Research Essay: Examine the Similar Narrative Techniques used
in *My Brilliant Career*, *Strictly Ballroom*, & *Muriel's Wedding*'
<http://cs.art.rmit.edu.au/students/media/kaarin/cinema1.html> 1995

O'REGAN, Tom, "'Beyond Australian film?'" Australian Cinema in the 1990s'
<http://kali.murdoch.edu.au/cntinuum/film/1990s.html> (no date)

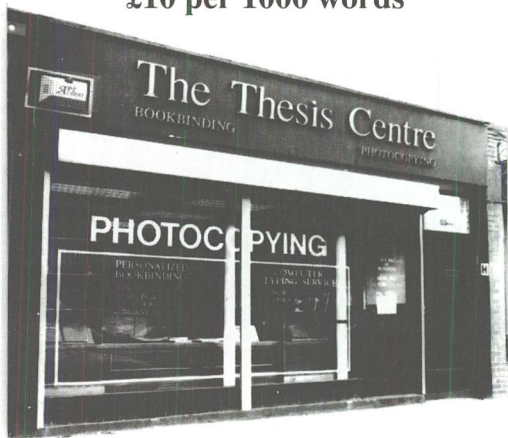
HARD BINDING

	<i>1 Book</i>	<i>2 Books</i>	<i>3 Books</i>
48 Hour	£15.00	£13.50 each	£12.50 each
24 Hour	£18.00	£16.00 each	£15.00 each
*5 Hour	£22.00	£19.00 each	£17.50 each

Photocopying From £0.06p per page

PHONE: 4753616

**Word Processing / Typing
£10 per 1000 words**



65 Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2.