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ANIMALS IN THE LANDSCAPE

An analysis of the role of the animal image in representations
of identity in selected Australian feature films
from 1971 to 2001

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of identity in selected Australian feature films
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by

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Abstract

Despite the salient role of the landscape in the development of white Australian identity, and the prominence of the landscape discourse in dominant film commentary, little attention has been afforded to the function of the animal image as a cultural representational code in the context of the meanings educed. The aim of this study is to examine the animal and human-animal representations in selected Australian films released between 1971 and 2001, and to establish the various ways in which such a focus foregrounds significations which offer new, or more complex, articulations of Australian identity.

This study was confined to live-action representations of animals, not necessarily as central figures, in Australian feature films. Within the three-decade time-frame, the films chosen for analysis were selected to provide illustrations of the main hypothesis through a range of narrative themes and genres. The films considered include those recognised as forerunners to the Revival (e.g. *Walkabout* and *Wake in Fright*); classics of the Revival (e.g. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*); Australian produced international commercial successes (e.g. *The Man From Snowy River* and *Crocodile Dundee*); as well as films which have fallen off the radar of recent Australian film commentary (e.g. *Mad Dog Morgan* and *Long Weekend*), and those that never made it into the matrix of intellectual representational discourse (e.g. *Howling III: The Marsupials* and *Razorback*).

The films were analysed as open-ended metaphors, allowing for negotiated and oppositional readings. The images and the narratives of the films were interpreted using qualitative methods grounded ontologically in a mixed method semiotic approach. All representational modes were considered: image, symbol, analogy, allegory, metaphor or metonymy. Where appropriate, cultural, psychological and behavioural theories from reception studies were employed to describe or decode textual effects. The discussion addresses overt messages and alternate interpretations. The dominant meanings were considered from the social reflection perspective and where pertinent, analysed through social imaginary theory.

The analysis found that *Walkabout* functions as the seminal text in the study of animal symbolism, human-animal representation and the objective or 'ecological' perspective in post-Revival Australian cinema. The film introduces a new mode and style of animal representation evident in many subsequent Australian films.

Films set around the time of Federation featuring marginalised protagonists and the landscape are found to be nationing allegories, presenting themes of equal import and greater contemporary relevance than those of male representation. More recent films with marginalised protagonists exhibit a shift in focus from the concerns of emerging nationhood to those of Australia's emerging cosmopolitanism.

In representations of masculinity and the landscape, the privileging of the physical activity of human-animal interaction resituates the texts beyond the customary matrices of patriarchal affirmation and the promotion of a pastoral ethos. Themes of human-animal 'mateship' and inter-species egalitarianism are identified, as well as the

presentation of conflict resolution through symbolic metamorphosis into animality. The films are revealed to be a more complex exposition of Australian identity than previously recognised, marking a distinct development in the progression of national representations towards an environmentally aware ethos.

Analysis of the horror genre foregrounds the nexus between Australian identity, assimilation and metamorphosis into animality. The feral/indigenous dichotomy is identified as a key trope in Australian representation and the portrayal of particular modes of human-animal relationships are seen to function as indicators of deviance in characterisation. The discussion also highlights the way in which the privileging of animal representations works to emphasise the universality of the films' concerns, while simultaneously grounding them in a specific culture and location.

Principally, the findings in this study confirm my original proposition that animal-centred readings of the selected films would reveal a rich seam of fresh interpretative possibilities relevant to the discourse of Australian national cinema and identity. I have also argued that many of the cultural significations and thematic nuances offered by the texts have been overlooked or misinterpreted by a dominant commentary which repeats the omissions inherent in the viewpoint of the sublime aesthetic by failing to recognise the codes and conventions signified in the detail of the filmic representations.

More broadly, this study exemplifies the ways in which animal-centred readings not only resituate certain texts within the cannon of Australian national cinema, but how depictions of animals and the human-animal relationship function simultaneously as both nationing and universalising tropes. By admitting animal-focused discussion into the

norms of Australian cultural criticism and textual discourse, the resulting significations connect the texts with a global contemporary inflection in existential concern: namely that of the relationship between humans and the environment.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma at any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no work previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Helene Forscher

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