

# Pioneering an Australian Children's Film Genre in *Bush Christmas*

By Kate Barker for HIS290: Upfront: A history of Australian Film

Ralph Smart's 1947 children's feature film, *Bush Christmas*, was the first film of this type produced in Australia and has provided the foundation for a distinctly 'Australian' genre of children's films. Its intended audience, the role of the bush, and role of the child characters serve to pare away any decorative or intellectually challenging ideas, leaving only the essentials of the child-hero story, both narratively and environmentally, and creating a framework for Australian children's films that has continued through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite being Australian in every other way, *Bush Christmas* was funded by Children's Entertainment Films – an English organisation, which later became the Children's Film Foundation – and was produced for viewing by English children (Pike & Cooper 1998). Even though all work for the film was completed either on location in the Blue Mountains, or in the studio in Sydney – an undertaking that Albie Thoms argued was fundamental to Australian film making (cited in Zielinski 2007, p. 2) – *Bush Christmas* was released in England six months earlier than in Australia (Pike & Cooper 1998), with Australian audiences not seeing the film until just before the Christmas of 1947. Despite being known as an Australian director, Ralph Smart was born and raised in England with Australian parents, and did not come to Australia until 1940, after which he worked with the Department of Information and the R.A.A.F, utilising his skills as, primarily, a documentary director (Pike & Cooper 1998). Both Smart's English background and his work with documentaries is clearly visible throughout the film and both complement the simplistic storytelling of the children's film genre. Mary Field suggested that part of the reason why the film was so successful in England was because of the curiosity "roused by the setting, the Australian accents, and episodes such as Neza's cheerful eating of a witchetty grub" (Field, cited in Pike & Cooper 1998, p. 205), a curiosity that would have been shared by Smart during his own childhood, but would not have necessarily been as important had the film been directed by an Australian-born director. Indeed, in his exploration of critical theory within children's literature, Peter Hunt asserts that the content of children's literature – textual and filmic – explains "what we might otherwise have thought was obvious" (cited in Lesnik-Oberstein 2004, p. 2). In his direction of the film, Smart has clearly drawn attention to significant differences between the culture of the story and the culture of the intended audience. The film utilises diegesis (in much the same way that a documentary would) through the use of a voice-over, which introduces the Marra-Marra valley, points out that "on our side of the world, Christmas comes in the middle of summer" (2:22), and continues to provide reference for the passing of time and explanations of the action happening on the screen. This narration serves a dual purpose; not only does it ensure its intended audience is able to follow the story, but it also serves to highlight aspects of life in Australia that foreign children would find fascinating, effectively providing a basis for their understanding of an Australian identity.

From its initial introduction during the title sequence, the Australian landscape plays an important role in *Bush Christmas*. The title sequence of the film portrays the Australian bush,

title, and credits rolling over what at first glance appears to be merely a photograph of the bush, but is revealed as moving images of gum trees: relatively stationary with their leaves moving in a breeze. This practice of having moving images behind the title sequence was distinctly Australian, with Adrian Danks noting that the American equivalents favoured still images; this emphasis on moving images is reflective of the “dynamic themes of action and movement” that dominated Australian films of the 1930s and 1940s (2005, p. 101). The title sequence is then followed with panning shots of the Marra-Marra Valley, the landscape being the only character in those shots; the first human characters are not introduced until the images are of the small township. While Tom O’Reagan (cited in Danks 2005, p. 102) notes that the way in which landscape is figured within a film is indicative of a national cinema approach, Peter Mathews argues that the emphasis placed on the Australian landscape is an attempt to enforce the idea of Australia as *Terra Nullius* (2009, p. 185). This emptiness of country continues throughout the film, with mention of how distant civilisation was at various points of the movie, with sweeping shots of the Blue Mountains showing no sign of habitation (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Panning shots of Blue Mountains (1:37-1:52)*

The Australian environment becomes its own character within the movie, with the children receiving aid from the bush and the creatures within it at opportune moments. When planning their raid on the horse thieves’ camp, the children arrange for the sound of a mopoke to be the alarm should anyone else come by and when danger approaches. Before the child left on watch can react, a mopoke calls the alarm and is heard down in the valley (see Figure 2). Soon after, the children use the howl of a dingo to convince the thieves it was wild animals disturbing them, and towards the conclusion of the film it is noted that the “stallion seemed to sense there was danger” and started shying to try to alert the children (108:34). The animals of the bush, even in their absence, are allied with the children and serve to hinder the thieves.



Figure 2: *Mopoke in bush* (38:12)

While mention is made of ‘blacks’ living in the area, there is no interaction with any humans other than children and thieves until the culmination of the film, when ‘civilisation’ rides into a deserted mining town to rescue the children. Despite the town being abandoned, it is still important to note that it is within a settled area that the thieves are caught, supporting Mathews’ view that Australian films reassert the idea of the necessity of colonisation to bring order (2009, p. 185).

While several silent films had been produced in Australia with children as their subject matter, *Bush Christmas* was the first Australian film falling into the second of May and Ramsland’s genres of children’s films, being produced for children rather than about them (2007, p. 137). Stuart Hanson perceived various themes prevalent within the social construct of childhood (2000, p 147) and *Bush Christmas* addresses childhood according to two of those themes: firstly, child as nature (as evidenced by the assistance of the bush mentioned in the previous section) and secondly, the child as an ‘incomplete adult’, with limited ability to simply apprehend the thieves but with the maturity of thought to track and contain them until adults could arrive. The bush, and the children’s world, is “contaminated by adult culture and adult subterfuge”, resulting in a hero-quest for the children. Filiz Erdemir Goze suggests that children’s adventure films follow the three stages of a Hero Journey (Dissociation, Initiation and Return). However, unlike adult heroes who are traditionally male, the child-hero can be either male or female, and whereas the adult hero has left part of their life behind at the culmination of their journey, the child-hero can navigate the adult world and still return to childhood, albeit with an increased maturity and self-confidence (2013, p. 1794). The experience of the children in *Bush Christmas* follows this hero journey pattern with all five children playing their own role in the experience and all returning home to childhood with lessons learned from their successful quest. The journey of the child-hero is not simply a

physical, external journey, but often signifies an emotional, internal transition (May & Ramsland 2007, p. 142), and in *Bush Christmas* the physical journey of the children mirrors their internal journey to make amends.

Since the release of *Bush Christmas*, Australian children's films have followed the formula provided by the film: the child-hero is at home in the bush with the Australian landscape continuing to play a central role to story development. Animated films such as the *Dot* films (1977-1994) and *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) take the role of the bush a step further with an immersion in and communication with the environment, while live action movies such as *Stormboy* (1976), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), and *Paper Planes* (2014) use landscape and environment to signify the physical manifestation of internal transitions. Within Australian children's films, the bush is familiar and core to Australian identity, continuing the example set by *Bush Christmas* and its child-hero story.

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