

## **Indigenous representation in Australian film**

By Jon Hewitt for HIS290: History of Film in Australia

The way in which Australian Indigenous peoples are represented in Australian cinema has evolved and changed with each passing decade, often in line with cultural shifts towards race relations and rhetoric. From the problematic and confused tale of forced assimilation in *Jedda* to the violent revenge story depicted in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, from the pre-colonial narratives of *Ten Canoes* to the stark modern day dystopia of *Samson and Delilah*; these four films have played an important role in challenging the Australian identity and asking audiences to examine not only Australia's history but the present-day situation of Indigenous peoples. Through examining these films, it is clear that the cinematic telling of Indigenous stories is of vital importance to the formation of a cinematic identity that encompasses an inclusive and honest portrayal of history and contemporary Australian culture.

The 1955 film *Jedda*, directed by the esteemed Charles Chauvel, was upon release undoubtedly viewed as a pioneering example of Australian cinema and remains to this day a film that attracts much academic debate and scholarly attention. In what would have been a controversial decision at the time, Chauvel cast Indigenous actors for two of the three starring roles in the story of *Jedda*, a film about an Indigenous girl raised in a white home, Marbuck, an enigmatic stranger who acts as a seductive reminder of *Jedda*'s culture and Joe, the assimilated 'half caste' stockman (Lucas 2015, p. 110). A combination of courage and naiveté is palpable in the films attempt to juxtapose *Jedda*'s longing for her own culture with the dominating colonial culture she has been raised in (Hickling-Hudson 1990, p. 267). The attempt by *Jedda*'s adoptive family to raise her as they would their own white child is stiflingly restrictive as there cannot be any neutral ground for *Jedda* because, unlike the character of Joe, the 'half caste' stockman and intended fiancé, *Jedda* is doomed to unsuccessfully assimilate due to her 'full blood' (Crilly 2001, p. 37). This fact is made absolutely clear in Joe's proclamation after *Jedda*'s ultimate demise in the final scene of the film (88m 50s): 'was it our right to expect that *Jedda*, one of a race so mystic and so removed, should be of us in one short lifetime?' (Crilly 2001, p. 37). Tackling the issue of assimilation in 1955 was considerably controversial and it is perhaps for this reason that Chauvel appears unsure as to his position on this topic, often presenting the audience with completely opposing views on what, at the time, was a commonly accepted ideology (Lucas 2015, p. 108). It is important to note that, at the time of release, the majority of cinemas in Australia were still segregated and that upon European distribution the film was

renamed *'Jedda the Uncivilised'*, a title so loaded in Colonial superiority that it would be unthinkable in today's cultural climate (Kevin 2013, p.166). Chauvel succeeds in producing a film that questions the issue of assimilation, and although in today's political climate it is open to criticism for its somewhat cumbersome approach, Chauvel undoubtedly paved the way for future filmmakers to further tackle issues concerning Indigenous Australians.

By the late '70s and throughout the 1980s, Australian cinema was prepared to examine the concept that Australian Colonial history was more complex and shocking than had previously been acknowledged. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (CJB) directed by Fred Schepisi in 1978 held the title for biggest budget of any Australian film at \$1.28 million at the time of its release, firmly establishing itself as an important player in the rejuvenation of Australian cinema known as the 'New Wave' (Donnar 2011). The film received rave reviews from critics but failed to succeed at the box-office which in hindsight is often attributed to its unapologetic attempt to disrupt politically biased discussions of race relations (Hickling-Hudson 1990, p. 268). The screenplay, based on the Thomas Keneally novel of the same name, focuses on the plight of a 'half caste' Indigenous Australian, who sets out on a mission of revenge after experiencing appalling injustices whilst attempting to succeed in the settler dominated world he has been raised in (Buckmaster 2014). Schepisi paints a bleak picture cinematically, using the camera to cut back and forth from Jimmie's black environment of depressing shadowy figures, huddled groups, in squalid surroundings and the oppressive white world where Jimmie is seduced by the icons of so called 'modernity' only to then be rejected by those that control access to them (Hickling-Hudson 1990, p. 268). While doing his best to assimilate into white culture, Jimmie is exploited and mistreated, yet he has been conditioned as such that he no longer feels a connection to his Indigenous culture, cruelly criticising members of his family and their traditions and it is through this lost identity, that Schepisi portrays cultural hybridity as a potentially calamitous force (Ryan-Fazilleau 2012, p. 30). Jimmie's suffering and exploitation by the white world he has so desperately attempted to succeed in ultimately leads him to a violent breakdown, embarking on a murderous frenzy, and whilst 'we' the audience do not condone his actions, we do empathise with his plight; it is in this context that the film is not portraying Jimmie as a heroic outlaw but rather as a symbol of the destructive outcome of forced assimilation (Hickling-Hudson 1990, p. 269). Four decades since the theatrical release of *CJB*, it remains a highly acclaimed, controversial and at times polarising piece of cinema, igniting debate not only about concepts of assimilation but also leading the film industry to question the validity of Australian Indigenous stories told by white filmmakers.

The 2006 film *Ten Canoes*, a collaboration between Dutch-Australian director Rolf de Heer and Indigenous-Australian Peter Djigirr treads new ground in a unique production that received critical praise internationally. The story takes place in two distinct time periods, the ‘present’ inspired by a series of photographs taken by anthropologist David Thompson in the mid-1930s and ‘The Dreaming’, a period the narrator refers to throughout the film (O’Hara 2008, p. 96). The Dreamtime story revolves around a young man’s attraction to one of his older brother’s wives, and is used in the present story line to advise a young man in a similar situation about respecting tribal law (O’Hara 2008, p.96). De Heer utilises a number of cinematic techniques to effectively distinguish the separation between the two stories, with the present day story shot in black and white, filmed from a distance and on a stationary camera, providing one distinct viewpoint within which to frame each scene, thereby replicating the photographs that De Heer was inspired by (Walsh 2006, p.12). In distinct contrast to this is the Dreamtime story which is shot in vivid colour with free ranging cameras enhancing and favouring the value of an idealised past (Renes 2014, p. 857). *Ten Canoes* is renowned for its unconventional mode of production, pursuing a largely non-commercial approach to filmmaking, whereby the cast were all members of the Ramingining community and were heavily involved in the collaborative process: De Heer claimed in various interviews that ‘they’re telling the story, and I’m the mechanism by which they can, I tried as hard as possible to not have any voice at all’ (Jorgensen 2016, p. 169). This is particularly evident in the voice-over narrative in the opening scene (1m 30s) when the audience is told ‘I am going to tell you a story. It’s not your story....it’s my story’ (Renes 2014, p. 854). Aside from the voice-over narrative, the dialogue throughout *Ten Canoes* is spoken in Ramingining adding to the overall authenticity of the story (Jorgensen 2016, p. 170). *Ten Canoes* is unique in the history of Australian Indigenous film in that it involved the extensive consultation of the Ramingining people on story, script and casting, thereby providing a new template for future productions.

Throughout the 2000’s Australian cinema witnessed a growing number of Indigenous directors tackling the issues of what it means to be an Indigenous Australian in contemporary Australia. In 2009, Indigenous Australian director Warwick Thornton wrote the screenplay, and directed and compiled the score for *Samson and Delilah* (Milner 2012, p. 100). The story of two teenage Indigenous Australians living in a remote and isolated community plagued by poverty and addiction; the film follows the teens as they become increasingly disillusioned and resentful of their situation and their attempt to find a new world to inhabit (Redwood 2009, p. 28). The film

revolves around two specific narratives, the first being the love that develops between Samson and Delilah and secondly the monotony of life on a remote community (Milner 2012, p.103). These two themes are intrinsically intertwined, as it is the tedious and detached existence in the community that spawns the love the two characters share through the need to survive (Milner 2012, p.102). The theme of tedium and monotony pervades every element of the mise-en-scène and specifically the score as Thornton uses minimal dialogue, with Samson only uttering one word in total throughout the film (Redwood 2009, p. 29). This deliberate avoidance of dialogue serves to illustrate the lack of voice that Australian Indigenous youth have within Australian society (Redwood 2009, p. 28). The initial view of Samson's environment appears devoid of Indigenous culture as the familiar icons of western consumerism are seen in the clothes they wear and the products purchased from the community's local shop (Ryan-Fazilleau 2012, pp. 32). As the cinematic gaze focuses on Delilah's world, however, we are introduced to her role as caretaker for her ailing grandmother whom she paints traditional artworks with; it is here that the most dialogue takes place and it is all spoken in the native dialect of the Walpiri people (Ryan-Fazilleau 2012, pp. 32). Despite Delilah's connection to her culture, Thornton has placed his two protagonists in a contemporary setting that is devoid of opportunity or support, as bleak and desolate as the landscape itself.

Thornton uses the theme of monotony, isolation and punishment as a means to remove Samson and Delilah from their environment and into an unknown and unfamiliar world. A clever use of repetitive music enhances the monotony of everyday life in the community and Samson's attempts to play music that differs from the 'Ska/reggae' styles favoured by his brothers' band are thwarted at every attempt (Milner 2012, p. 104). After Delilah experiences a violent punishment at the hands of her relatives, both Samson and Delilah endeavour to escape the remote community fleeing to the nearest town, yet it is here, in the white community of Alice Springs, that Samson and Delilah experience even greater hardships; alienation, homelessness, oppression, violence and continued addiction (Redwood 2009, p. 28). It is within this part of the story that Thornton explores the lost child trope, recalling colonial themes by positioning Samson and Delilah in an alien and hostile white urban Australia (Ryan-Fazilleau 2012, p.32). Thornton's sophisticated screenplay and use of cinematic techniques are crucial in exploring the themes of addiction, isolation, monotony and love, successfully placing Indigenous Australia in a contemporary filmic context, portraying social realities and pioneering an Indigenous realist approach to filmmaking (Milner 2012, p. 104). It is important to note that only one year prior to the release of *Samson and Delilah*, the Australian Prime Minister had

made the official apology to the Australian Indigenous peoples for the policies that led to the removal of Indigenous children from their families. This momentous turn in Australian history perhaps created an environment where audiences were more open to accepting the present-day problems facing Indigenous communities as being intrinsically linked to historical events.

The focus of both *Jedda* and *CJB* is on the topic of assimilation and the confusion of identity experienced when an Indigenous Australian is raised in the colonial white world, disconnected from their culture yet simultaneously living alongside it (Crilly 2001, p. 43). The strain of conforming to a culture unwilling to embrace them manifests itself as anger, sorrow and uncertainty, ultimately resulting in intense tragedy (Hickling-Hudson 1990, p.266). There are a number of similarities in the cinematic techniques used to convey the disconnection of cultures in both films as the world of the white colonisers is epitomised by claustrophobic interiors featuring tightly cropped shots which are then contrasted with the depictions of the grandiose Australian landscape within which true Australian Indigeneity is centred (Buckmaster 2014). Similarly, the yearning for a lost identity by both Jimmie and Jedda is expressed in scenes that almost replicate each other, Jedda upon being lured into the bush by the song of Marbuck finds herself uncontrollably stamping her feet in what appears to be a traditional Indigenous dance (20m 0s) where as an almost identical scene takes place in *CJB* (45m 52s) when Jimmie hears the cries of what he believes to be his newborn son (Buckmaster 2014). In both *Jedda* and *CJB* the two main protagonists are unable to fully relate to their Indigenous roots yet feel disconnected to the colonial culture they have been raised in, mirroring the experience of thousands of Indigenous Australian children that make up the stolen generation (Hickling-Hudson 1990, p.270). From the 1950s to the 1990s the majority of Australian films dealing with Indigenous Australian subject matter focussed on the issues of colonialism, assimilation and loss.

In contrast, both *Ten Canoes* and *Samson and Delilah* tell stories that do not revolve around the issues of Australia's colonial history, effectively broadening the scope of Indigenous stories and how they can be translated to film. De Heer's film *Ten Canoes* tells an entirely Indigenous story set in a time and place untouched by colonialism resulting in one of the few films that offers a characterisation of Indigenous Australians devoid of the victimisation and persecution intrinsically linked to Australia's white colonial history (Jorgensen 2016, p. 170). Whilst it is important for Australian film to address the difficult realities of Australian colonial history, *Ten Canoes* proves that it is similarly important to celebrate Indigenous Australian stories that

existed before the travesty of colonialism (Jorgensen 2016, p. 170). In 2009, *Samson and Delilah* set a new benchmark for Australian cinema, not only because it is an Australian Indigenous story told by an Indigenous Australian, but because of its contemporary stand point in the here and now, focussing on the reality of the legacies of colonialism (Milner 2012, p. 104). Unlike both *Jedda* and *CJB* where the nature of their ancestry, 'full blood' or 'half caste' is the overwhelming discourse of power, Thornton avoids making any distinction as both Samson and Delilah are simply presented as Indigenous Australians. This decision by Thornton to ignore the concept is symbolic of a rejection of the long held Darwinian biological approach to culture which has been embedded within Australia's race relations since colonisation (Ryan-Fazilleau 2012, p. 32).

For Indigenous Australians, questions of identity and culture are far more than simply matters of artistic expression, they are political by nature as definitions and interpretations of identity greatly impacted by power and race relations. The ways in which Australian film has represented Indigenous Australians has varied and evolved in a way that has mirrored and at times shaped the relationship between Australian settler society and its Indigenous peoples, questioning beliefs and challenging behaviours. From the ground-breaking and controversial depictions of failed assimilation in both *Jedda* and *CJB* to the escapist Dreamtime storytelling of *Ten Canoes*, to the bleak, yet hyperrealism of *Samson and Delilah*, Australian film has proven itself to be an essential tool in the communication of Indigenous Australian stories, both historic and contemporary.

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