

## Australian identity: a cinematic roll call

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**LEARNING AREAS:** English, Media Studies

**EDUCATION LEVEL:** 7-12

Defining what it means to be Australian has vexed researchers in all walks of life, the cinema being no exception. Since the beginnings of cinema in Australia from around 1896, Australian films have charted a range of views of the Australian identity, and in this article, I have identified four main strands.

The first category can be labelled 'The Larrikin Image'. This 'she'll be right, mate', dour, get the job done, or good-natured sense of humour category can be identified in films dating back to 1919 (*The Sentimental Bloke*). Best exemplifying this image are the Dad and Dave characters in the series of films beginning with *On Our Selection* (1932), and culminating in the recent, disastrous remake with Joan Sutherland (1995)—from which the audience stayed away in droves. *40,000 Horsemen* (1940) and *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944) featuring Chips Rafferty are prime examples of the dour Australian at war, also found in such films as *Eureka Stockade* (1949), *A Town Like Alice* (1956), *Robbery Under Arms* (1956), *Smiley* (1956) and *The Shiralee* (1957). A variation of this theme continues in *The Sundowners* (1960), *Storm Boy* (1976) and *Man From Snowy River* (1982), while some film-makers gave it a harder edge in such films as *Caddie* (1974), *Petersen* (1974), *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), *Fast Talking* (1982) and *We of the Never Never* (1982), a trend that reaches its apotheosis with the classic *Mad Max* (1979).

A more humorous dig at the larrikin image can be found in *Eliza Fraser* (1976), *Fatty Finn* (1979), *Malcolm* (1985), *The Big Steal* (1990) and the most successful of these films, *Crocodile Dundee* (1988). Yahoo Serious inverts this category, creating two amusing characters moulded in the larrikin image: *Young Einstein* (1988) and *Reckless Kelly* (1993). More recently, three films complete this category: *Welcome to Woop Woop* (1997), a critically vilified, over the top homage to the larrikin with satiric and slapstick overtones; *The Castle* (1998), a popular underdog comedy that harks back to the Dad and Dave films; and *Mullet* (2000), an amusing yet traditional view of the Australian larrikin.

The next category goes one step further than the Australian larrikin films, by portraying Australians in an openly satiric, at times caustic and socially critical way. Characters in these films are targets for humour, with their identities still very much works in progress. *The Naked Bunyip* (1970) is a very funny satire on Australian mores and deserves more attention. *They're A Weird Mob* (1966) sends up Australia's xenophobia (indicative of a lack of strong identity), which is seen even more strikingly in

*Stork* (1971), *Alvin Purple* (1973) and *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972). Using sport symbolically to satirize Australian politics and mateship, *The Club* (1980) is an excellent example of social satire, also seen in *Don's Party* (1976), a darker, edgier political satire that confronts our notions of the larrikin Australian. *Emoh Ruo* (1985) is an underrated send-up of Australian home ownership, while *Death in Brunswick* (1990) pokes fun at the Aussie identity and sense of humour. *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) is a scenery-chewing satire of a closed group (ballroom dancing), a thinly veiled attack on the Aussie character which continues in *Muriel's Wedding* (1994). *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) satirizes the outback redneck by taking shots at a range of Australian stereotypes in an unsubtle way. *The Wog Boy* (1998) harks back to *They're A Weird Mob* by sending up cultural differences and Australian xenophobia, while *He Died With A Felafel In His Hand* (2001) cleverly lampoons Australian social attitudes and mateship. Finally, what you wish to make of *Moulin Rouge* (2000), another scenery-chewing Australian satire, albeit set in France, is certainly up to you.

The third category of Australian identity offers a more introspective view of Australians, highlighting the examination of who we are. The best example of this category is *Between Wars* (1974), the story of a doctor between World War I and II. This film exemplifies a major strain in the Australian character, the passive or reactive approach to dealing with external challenges. *On the Beach* (1959) is an early example of this type; as the nuclear holocaust spreads to Australia, people resign themselves to their fate. *Summer of the 17th Doll* (1960) dramatically portrays two relationships caught in social expectations. Paul Cox's films are prime examples of this style of cinema, with *Kostas* (1979), *Lonelyhearts* (1981), *Man of Flowers* (1983), *My First Wife* (1984), *Cactus* (1986) and *Innocence* (2000) highlighting the interior journeys of their main protagonists.

The '70s saw the production of a number of films with an introspective bent: *Walkabout* (1971) uses Aboriginal motifs as signposts to the safety of two lost white children; *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975) seeks a supernatural explanation for the missing girls' fate; *Newsfront* (1976) presents the external political and social forces determining the Australian character; *The Devil's Playground* (1976), *Picture Show Man* (1977), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979) explore strong individuals caught by social challenges that eventually become insurmountable.

*Winter of Our Dreams* (1981) shows us a fated romance, while *Celia* (1988) is a delicately constructed social critique of the 1950s. *Annie's Coming Out* (1984), with its laudable depiction of physical impairment, presents its characters as victims, a stereotype that *Dance Me to My Song* (1998) tries to break. *Kangaroo* (1986) and *Evil Angels* (1988) use politics and the media to portray social victims, while *Dead Calm* (1988) is a tense thriller loaded with symbolism. *Bliss* (1985) is an audacious satire of a resurrected character, while *High Tide* (1987) is a beautifully observed family drama, seen again and even more tragically in *Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992). *Dogs In Space* (1986) is a revelation of the vortex that is the drug culture, while *Return Home* (1989) is a superb family drama full of insight. *Father* (1990) is a surprise, the personal drama of a woman whose father is revealed as a former Nazi, while *Spotswood* (1991) highlights the family business as victim of the global economy. *Proof* (1991) is a sturdy three-hander about people caught in the constraints of their social roles, and *The Nostradamus Kid* (1993) is an amusing, introspective social critique. *Kiss Or Kill* (1997), despite its kinetic trappings, plays its criminal heroes as passive recipients of justice. Three recent films round off

this type: *The Dish* (1999) is a witty and quietly observed story of Australia's involvement in the space race; *Silent Partner* (2001) is the story of two down and outs given a chance tinged with tragedy; and *Lantana* (2001) is a beautifully observed drama of interlocking characters, victims of their own flaws.

The fourth and final category can be called the dramatically incisive, socially critical view of Australian identity, redolent with messages about national identity. One of the first films in this category, *For The Term Of His Natural Life* (1921), presented the ignominy of transportation in Australia's convict history. *Jedda* (1955) reveals a major flaw in the Australian character, explored in more detail in other films such as: *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), *The Last Wave* (1977), *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986), *Blackfellas* (1993), *Dead Heart* (1996) and *Yolngu Boy* (1999). Australia's involvement in external conflicts is critically explored in *Breaker Morant* (1980), *Gallipoli* (1981) and *Blood Oath* (1990).

The migrant experience in Australia is depicted in *Silver City* (1984), *Looking For Alibrandi* (2000) and *La Spagnola* (2001). The prison system as a microcosm of social ills is found in *Stir* (1980), *Ghosts of the Civil Dead* (1988), *Every Night Every Night* (1994) and even *Chopper* (2000). *Ned Kelly* (1970) introduces a socially critical view of an Australia that prosecutes the larrikin anti-hero; while *Hard Knocks* (1980), *Mouth To Mouth* (1985) and *Head On* (1999) look at the plight of young people in a harsh society. Social satire as revelation can be found in the unusual *The Night the Prowler* (1978), *Puberty Blues* (1981), *Goodbye Paradise* (1982) and a film so bizarre it is almost uncategorizable, *Everlasting Secret Family* (1987), a political satire with sexual overtones. Politics and polemics are at the centre of *Strikebound* (1983), *The Killing of Angel Street* (1981) and *Heatwave* (1982), the latter two searing indictments of business rorting, while *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) is a rare excursion into foreign policy. Social policy is ripped apart by such films as: *27A* (1974), *The Navigator* (1975), *Careful He Might Hear You* (1982), *Fran* (1985), *Wrong World* (1984), and the confronting *Shame* (1987).

Generally, Australian film-makers tend to avoid challenging or confronting the audience, particularly on social issues and the Australian character, but there are some notable exceptions. *Stone* (1974), an exposé of bikie gangs, criticizes the judicial system, while *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974) tears apart the outback town. *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987) and *Flirting* (1990) mount a criticism of small towns and education. *Romper Stomper* (1992) is a searing look at the right-wing underbelly fomented by unemployment and ignorance, while *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994) is a challenging portrayal of incipient violence and intolerance. *Four Jacks* (1999) is a tense thriller about corruption in the hospitality industry, while *Envy* (1999) is a revenge drama that subtly criticizes another flaw in the Australian character. *The Bank* (2001) cuts a swathe through the financial institutions, representing them as the worst in Australian icons. Finally, the two best social critiques of the Australian identity and the culture of Australian towns and the outback can be found in *Wake In Fright* (1970), and the vastly underrated and rarely seen *Walk The Talk* (1999).

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## Discussion Topics

1. How would you define what it means to be Australian?
2. Try to find a film, book or song that best captures what being Australian means to you?
3. Organise a debate in class in which you discuss whether or not there is one true Australian identity?

## What to Watch

- **Crocodile Dundee**
- **The Castle**
- **Strictly Ballroom**
- **Looking for Alibrandi**

## Find out More

- **Film in Australia**  
<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/film/>
- **Australian Cinema and National Identity**  
<http://home.mira.net/~satadaca/australi.htm>
- **Australian Film Institute**  
<http://www.afi.org.au/>

## Study Guides

- **The Castle**  
<http://enhancetv.com.au/shop/product.php?productid=12653787>
- **Looking for Alibrandi**  
<http://enhancetv.com.au/shop/product.php?productid=12653911>

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