

# Australian Cinema: Representation and Identity

## Course Details

Course Designator & Number: SDNY 3003

Number of Credits: 3

Language of Instruction: English

## Course Description

This course examines contemporary Australian cinema and its attempt to describe a uniquely Australian identity. The course thus has two interrelated points of inquiry. First, we will attempt to appreciate the context of Australian cinema – from modes of production to distribution. Second, the course will investigate the notion of an Australian identity as it is expressed in some of the most significant films in the Australian tradition. We will look at Australian genre cinema, the 70s Renaissance and recent transformations in the Australian film industry. The course will focus specifically on the theme of national identity and the growing debates around what constitutes a national cinema. Indeed, a question to be explored is the extent to which Australian films have reflected or determined Australian values. Comparisons with appropriate U.S. values and films are encouraged.

## Course Objectives

The main objective of this course is to enable students to engage with important issues of personal and collective, or national identity via the study of notable Australian films. The course will also provide a solid introduction to the field of film studies. At the conclusion of the course, you will be able to confidently address a film as an expression of social, political and aesthetic values.

## Methodology

The learning program of 3 1/4 hrs./week will consist of some relatively formal lecture input supported by PowerPoint slides (handout distributed to students); a relevant „Australian“

feature film (and/or selections from a number of films); plus student-centered seminar periods for discussions and student presentations.

Students will be expected to undertake a group presentation on a selected relevant topic, and to deliver (preferably using PowerPoint or OHPs) and defend their analyses on an individual and group basis to the tutor and class colleagues. Students will be referred to specific chapters in recommended books; to other relevant material; will be encouraged to draw on their own prior learning and film experience; and will be expected to make use of the library, local libraries and online sources (particularly [www.us.imdb.com](http://www.us.imdb.com)) to prepare themselves for class.

Important: Students are expected to watch the films in their own time, either as individuals or as groups. This is coursework that is required before each class, and we will not be showing full films in class, only extracts.

## Grading

### Penalties for Work Submitted Late

Assignments received after the due date will be reduced by five percent (5%) of the possible grade for the piece of work being assessed per day, up to seven (7) days after the due date. Work submitted more than seven (7) days after the due date will not be marked, unless arrangements have been made prior to the due date for an extension.

### Class Participation

Your participation mark is based on your preparation for class and your input into group discussion in all classes (excluding the class of your presentation - for which you will get a separate mark). You will need to demonstrate that you have read and thought about the set material for each week. Participation in class discussion will be marked on the constructiveness of your input to the class discussion and debate.

## Grading Rubric

Letter Grade	Score or Percentage	Description
A	93–100	Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.
A-	90–92	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements.

Letter Grade	Score or Percentage	Description
B+	87–89	
B	83–86	
B-	80–82	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect.
C+	77–79	
C	73–76	
C-	70–72	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to fully meet the course requirements.
D+	67–69	
D	60–66	
F	0–59	Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was either (1) completed but at a level of achievement that is not worthy of credit or (2) was not completed and there was no agreement between the instructor and the student that the student would be awarded an I.

## Summary of How Grades Are Weighted

Assignments	Percentage of Grade
Seminar Participation	15%
Film Evaluations	25%
Oral Presentation Topic	35%
Final Exam	25%
Seminar Participation	15%

## Course Content

### Oral Presentation Topic – 35%

You are asked to deliver an oral presentation to the class of 10 minutes based on a topic of your own construction. You are encouraged to screen one or more film clips to supplement your material. You should support your argument using the secondary source material available – but this should not substitute for a close analytical response to the film/s.

It is crucial that you begin to develop your topic as early as possible. I am only too happy to assist you in developing ideas – I can steer you in the direction of film and/or secondary sources. I would like to see some indication of your proposed topic (including film and secondary sources) by the end of Week 6 (Mar 5). Note: Oral Presentations will take place in weeks 8-11.

### Film Evaluation – 25%

You are required to write a film evaluation/review of the new Australian film, *Bran Nue Dae*. This is to be a formal work, though it does not require research or footnotes. Due: In class, week 5 (Tues Mar 2). Note: We will attend a screening of *Brand Nue Dae* at Dendy Cinemas, Newtown.

### End of Term Test – 25%

This test will be taken in the final class. It will comprise two short essay-style responses, addressing the material covered in the course.

### **Seminar Participation – 15%**

Seminar participation enables you to engage with course material, to contribute your ideas to the class, as well as to learn from the ideas of others. This semester, I am attributing 10% of your participation to your ability to lead a single seminar discussion (in groups) and 5% to your participation throughout semester

## **Unit 1**

### **Australia: Myths, Realities and the Search for National Identity**

- Film: Australia [Luhrmann]
- Reading: Turner, Graeme, "Whatever Happened to National Identity?" Metro 100 (Summer 1994), pp 32-35.
- Seminar Discussion: What accounts for a National Cinema? How might one nation's cinema differ from another's? You might consider the differences between Hollywood and the Australian industrial context. In what way does Buhrmann's Australia attempt to negotiate a responsibility to Australian cinema and a global cinematic tradition? Buhrmann's title for his epic (after much consideration) was Australia. Is this a film about Australia?
- Note: You should come to this seminar ready to sign up for a presentation topic.

## **Unit 2**

### **Heroism, War and Gallipoli**

- Film: Gallipoli [Weir]
- Reading: Rosenstone, Robert. "History in images/History in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film," American Historical Review 93 no 5 (December 1988), 117-1185. Haltof, Marek, "Gallipoli, Mateship, and the Construction of Australian National Identity". Journal of Popular Film and Television (March 22, 1993).
- Seminar Discussion: Can film claim to adequately „represent history? Are film images compatible with the requirements of recording history? In what way does Weir's film construct a myth of Australian heroism in times of war? Is this myth Australian or part of a broader cultural context? Gallipoli is often considered one of the most poignant representations of Australian identity. In what way does the film capture the importance of myth and ritual in building a national identity?

## Unit 3

### New Waves and New Identities: The Australian Renaissance

- Film: Picnic at Hanging Rock [Weir]
- Reading: Rayner, Jonathan, Picnic at Hanging Rock New York: Continuum, 2003: Chapter 2: "Picnic at Hanging Rock". Haltof, Marek, Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide. New York: Twayne, 1996: Chapter 1: "Peter Weir and the Australian New Wave Cinema".
- Seminar Discussion: Peter Weir's Picnic at Hanging Rock is often considered the seminal Australian New Wave film. Offer a brief explanation of cinematic new waves. As cinema, "Picnic at Hanging Rock" is radically "new", challenging the expectations of its audience. But its newness stems also from its depiction of a contemporary Australian identity. Weir uses the period setting to reconfigure the Australian landscape. Hanging Rock is thus a place of mystery and desire, and is Weir's metaphor of Australia itself. If Picnic at Hanging Rock is a mystery, what is Weir's resolution to the story? Page 6

## Unit 4

### The Australian Road: Masculinity, Violence and Road Culture

- Film: Mad Max [Miller], Mad Max 2 (The Road Warrior) [Miller]
- Reading: Martin, Adrian. The Mad Max Movies. Sydney: Currency Press, 2003. [Note: read selectively, focusing on chapters on Mad Max and Mad Max 2.] Johnke, Rebecca, "Manifestations of Masculinity: Mad Max and the Lure of the Forbidden Zone". Journal of Australian Studies 67 (2001): 118-226.
- Seminar Discussion: Miller's Mad Max established a new kind of Australian cinema, drawing on the traditions of American genre cinema. In what way is Mad Max a new kind of hybrid Australian film, drawing on cinematic traditions outside of Australia's national heritage? Mad Max and Mad Max 2 represent the industry's attempts to connect with an American film tradition – Max thus embodies a hybridized identity: part Australian, part American. Does Mad Max attempt to construct a vision of „Australia“ or something else entirely? Throughout his career, George Miller has been critical of the Australian film industry for its narrow perception of a national film culture. He was recently infuriated by the industry's unwillingness to regard Happy Feet as, ostensibly, an Australian film. What is your opinion of such a position?

## Unit 5

### Cross-Cultural Clash: "Michael J „Crocodile“ Dundee"

- Film: Crocodile Dundee [Falman]

- Reading: West, Russell, ““This is Man’s Country”. Masculinity and Australian National Identity in Crocodile Dundee”. In West, Russell and Frank Lay (eds.), *Subverting Masculinity: Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture*. Amsterdam, Netherlands; Rodopi; 2000. Zielinski, Andrew. “Two Breakthrough Spaces: Crocodile Dundee and Picnic at Hanging Rock” *Screen Education* 52 (2008): 130-134.
- Seminar Discussion: Crocodile Dundee draws on an age-old generic trope - the fish out of water: an American in the outback, and Hogan’s outback larrikan in New York City. In the wake of the film’s release, it had managed to transform Australian cinema and film culture entirely. Crocodile Dundee remains the most lucrative film in the history of Australian cinema and is in the top 50 grossing films of all time. Why? How did a „small“ Australian story speak to a global film culture? Offer a reading of the gender politics of Crocodile Dundee. Is the outback indeed „man’s country“? In 1986, the Australian Labor government had observed the atrocities committed against Aborigines. How does Mick see the Aboriginal issue of land claims?

## Unit 6

### High Camp, Humour and Irony: Postmodernism in Australia

- Film: Muriel’s Wedding [Hogan]
- Reading: O’ Regan, Tom, “Quirkiness in Australian Cinema”. *Australian Screen Education* 29 (Winter 2002). Page 7 Rustin, Emily, “Romance and Sensation in the „Glitter“ Cycle”. In Craven, Ian (ed.), *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*. London: Frank Cass: 2001: 133-148.
- Seminar Discussion: Rustin describes Australian cinema of the 1990s as the “Glitter” cycle. Briefly describe Rustin’s reading of this mode of film, that is at once “new” and native to a 1990s Australian sensibility, and yet reflects on traditional notions of the individual and society. Discuss the notion that Muriel’s Wedding is essentially stylised rather than realistic. If Picnic at Hanging Rock and Gallipoli were attempts to express a New Australian cinematic sensibility in the 1970s, in what way does Muriel’s Wedding express a different (or similar) sensibility? Weir’s vision is naturalistic, evoking a period in Australia’s history. Muriel’s Wedding and Priscilla: Queen of the Desert are fiercely contemporary films, updating the Australian identity for a postmodern, deeply ironic generation – discuss

## Unit 7

### The Land and the City: Nature, Spiritualism and the Past

- Film: Jindabyne [Lawrence]
- Reading: Gibson, Ross, “The Nature of a Nation: Landscape in Australian Feature Films”. In Gibson, R, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992: 63-81. Trbic, Boris. “Ray Lawrence's

Jindabyne: so much pain, so close to home". Screen Education no.44 (Summer 2006): 58-64.

- Seminar Discussion: Jindabyne is based on a short story by Raymond Carver, an influential American writer. The story was then adapted into a film by the great American film auteur, Robert Altman, and titled Short Cuts. Ray Lawrence, the director of Jindabyne, relocates the story of a group of American men to the Australian bush. He then overlays a narrative involving the murder and desecration of an Indigenous Australian woman. How successful is Lawrence in employing an American source in the service of an Australian story? In what way does Lawrence configure the land as a living entity, imbued with the spirit of its ancestry? Does Jindabyne provide a resolution to its series of conflicts? Is this film essentially about reconciliation in a political and cultural context? What is the meaning of the final sequence in the film?

## Unit 8

### White Australia: Settlement and Conquest

- Film: The Tracker [de Heer]
- Reading: Collins, Felicity and Davis, T., "Disputing history, remembering country in The Tracker and Rabbit-Proof Fence". Australian Historical Studies 37, no.128 (Oct 2006): 35-54. Probyn, Fiona, "The Ethics of Following and the No Road Film: Trackers, Followers and Fanatics". In Australian Humanities Review, December, Iss 37 (2005).
- Seminar Discussion: „The Tracker" is a political film – do you agree? What is the function of the various archetypal characterisations within the narrative? De Heer incorporates a number of mythic structures into the story, including a Christian narrative framework. In what way is guilt and innocence explored in the film? The Tracker returns to the „period" film of Australia's New Wave in the 1970s. But this is a very different period film, as much about a contemporary Australian identity than a country's past. Do you agree? The Tracker, for its good intentions, does little to illuminate the hardships of contemporary Indigenous Australian life. Do you agree? Discuss the function of music, violence and cinematic representation in the film.

## Unit 9

### Conflict and Reconciliation

- Film: Samson and Delilah [Thornton]
- Reading: Isaacs, Bruce, "Screening Australia: Samson and Delilah". Screen Education Issue 54 (2009): 12-17. Batty, Philip, "Another country: the world of Samson and Delilah" [A reflection on film producer and director, Warwick Thornton's career, his own time in the Territory as co-founder of CAAMA and the policy of Aboriginal self-determination.] Metro 161 (June 2009): 164-169.
- Seminar Discussion: Samson and Delilah presents another face of contemporary Australian cinema: fiercely independent, authentic, realistic and "true". Do you agree?



What is Thornton's approach to this simple love story? Is this in fact a political film? How significant is the fact of the director's own Aboriginality? Thornton grew up in the kinds of communities depicted in such detail in *Samson and Delilah*. Contrast this representation of Indigenous life with other representations we've already encountered in the course. You might consider *Australia*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Jindabyne* and *The Tracker*. Thornton offers a reconciliation of sorts – but it's a measured reconciliation that reflects on the past as well as the future of Indigenous Australian life.

## Unit 10

### Conflict and Reconciliation

- Film: *Romper Stomper* [Wright]
- Reading: Goldsmith, Ben, "All quiet on the western front? Suburban reverberations in recent Australian cinema". *Australian Studies* 14, nos 1-2 (Summer-Winter 1999): 115-132. Callahan, David, "His Natural Whiteness: Modes of Ethnic Presence and Absence in Some Recent Australian Films". In Craven, Ian (ed.), *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*. London: Frank Cass, 2001: 95-114.
- Seminar Discussion: In what way is Australian identity construed as ethnic in *Romper Stomper*? The preeminent Australian film critic, David Stratton, famously declared *Romper Stomper* a "racist film". Offer a response to Stratton's position. Offer a comparison between Wright's Australian representation of White supremacism with Tony Kaya's *American History X*. *Romper Stomper* depicts the lines that divide various cultural groups in Australian society. Is there any possibility for genuine community in this depiction?

## Unit 11

### The Australian New Wave: National and Global Cinemas in the New Millennium

- Film: *Lantana* [Lawrence]
- Reading: Simmons, Gary, "Into the tangle: perspectives on narrative in *Lantana*". *Screen Education* 41 (Summer, 2006): 111-115. O'Hara, Marguerite, "'Lantana': the threat and the attraction of the exotic". *Australian Screen Education* 42 (Autumn 2006): p117-125. Page 9
- Seminar Discussion: *Lantana*, released in 2001, offered a complex, subtle, mature Australian drama that was also a commercial success. What distinguishes *Lantana* as an Australian film? In what way does it continue the tradition developed in Australian film over several decades? *Lantana* is at once distinctive in its "Australianness", yet is obviously indebted to the stylistic trends that had developed in global cinematic traditions in the 1990s. As such, the film offers an articulation of what it means to be Australian in the new millennium. Yet, its achievement is also to illuminate the future of an Australian national cinema. Discuss.

## Unit 12

### Course Conclusions

- Film: There is no film designated for this week.
- Seminar Discussion: The class will be split into two sections:
  1. Course conclusions – a survey and final analysis of the material covered in the course. This will take the form of a lecture and seminar discussion.
  2. Final Assessment – 1.5 hr in-class test.

# Policies

## Attendance Policy

Students must attend all classes and gallery visits and be able to certificate genuine absences. Any absence should be justifiable in terms only of illness, religious holiday or an internship interview.

## University of Minnesota Policies & Procedures

Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action. The University Student Conduct Code defines scholastic dishonesty as follows:

### Scholastic Dishonesty

Scholastic dishonesty means plagiarizing; cheating on assignments or examinations; engaging in unauthorized collaboration on academic work; taking, acquiring, or using test materials without faculty permission; submitting false or incomplete records of academic achievement; acting alone or in cooperation with another to falsify records or to obtain dishonestly grades, honors, awards, or professional endorsement; altering forging, or misusing a University academic record; or fabricating or falsifying data, research procedures, or data analysis.

Within this course, a student responsible for scholastic dishonesty can be assigned a penalty up to and including an "F" or "N" for the course. If you have any questions regarding the expectations for a specific assignment or exam, ask.

### Student Conduct

The University of Minnesota has specific policies concerning student conduct. This information can be found [on the Learning Abroad Center website](#).