Chapter 1

(1989) The decades of survival: Australian cinema 1930–70

To think of the forty-odd years from the end of the silent period to the beginnings of the contemporary Australian cinema is to be reminded of how fragile are the indigenous traditions on which the so-called 'revival' rests. Taking simply feature films, the period since 1970 has seen easily three times the number made in Australia during 1930–70. Also, feature-film output in the silent period had at least a consistency, variety and continuity about it. The four decades under question here were the 'decades of survival', a long period during which feature production might be said to have *persisted* in the face of, at times, severe constraints. The reasons advanced to explain this are usually variations of the so-called 'media' or 'cultural imperialism' thesis. Australia and its cultural production have been the losers in an unequal exchange with dominant economic and cultural powers, principally the United States. Studies of the Australian cinema, especially those of John Tulloch,[1] have demonstrated a much greater and more interesting complexity of relations of domination and subordination than this thesis would allow.

One of the most intriguing ways that this thesis has been modified is by a more searching attention to the means by which

a 'dominated' culture's negotiation of its status is registered in the products of that culture themselves. This chapter pays particular attention to a selection of films from the 'decades of survival', chosen for, among other reasons, their varied but always engaging strategies of negotiation, of making sense, of the (itself historically variable) status of Australia as an 'import culture'. It can be no more than a selection, and a selection based on an internal division of the period that emphasises breaks and changes rather than thematic continuities across this long time-span. Each section begins with a brief justification of the purpose of the subdivision, and proceeds to discuss the films selected.

The 1930s: The Empire connection

One of the ways in which the media imperialism thesis oversimplifies the struggles of the Australian film industry is to construct a bilateral 'David and Goliath' scenario, the places respectively taken by Australia and the Hollywood 'octopus'. Instead, we need to note Tulloch's characterisation of the industry of the 1920s and 1930s as existing in a triangular relationship subtended by 'competing imperialisms', or, more precisely, by American media imperialism and British colonialism.[2] Indeed, notwithstanding the ever-present weight exerted both industrially and stylistically by Hollywood in Australia, the cinema of the 1930s should be seen as a moment of resurgent British, and Empire, influence. This, to be sure, was a 'last hurrah' for Empire, or, as Tulloch puts it, alluding to the Depression and the rapidly shifting allegiances that the Second World War would occasion, 'Australian cinema of the 1930s was especially articulate in its voicing of the British connection, precisely because the transparent value of that connection had for the first time been seriously thrown into doubt.'[3]

Nevertheless, the last hurrah yielded some significant voices. Basically, the 'Empire connection' should be seen as developing in

fertile soil: Australia, along with other British dominions such as Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, and other settler societies such as Argentina along with neighbouring South American nations was, and is, positioned in the world politico-economic system as a 'second world' nation, a society established on, and drawing from, the social and cultural heritage of its founder nation of the 'first world', but positioned economically in ways that closely resembled 'third world' nations. It is to be expected that an enduring characteristic of such societies would be overcompensatory displays of allegiance to a displaced heritage found jostling with an uncertain degree of subversion of it. Much of the social debate that the fledgling cinema industry aroused, around questions of censorship for instance, centred on the degree of erosion of 'British' values that it constituted. These kinds of debate were at the forefront during the Royal Commission into the Moving Picture Industry in 1927–28.

This Royal Commission was also important in that it was the first in a decade-long series of attempted and mostly abortive state interventions in the film industry that sought to follow Britain's, and other European countries', lead in the establishment of quotas and other legislative and production plans as 'nationalist' responses to the (by the late 1920s) achieved international dominance of Hollywood. New South Wales and Victoria, which by the 1930s were the only states in which feature production was pursued, enacted quota legislation, following the precedent established in Britain and New Zealand. Through the 1930s most Australian features reached the British market under the protective umbrella of its quota legislation (Cinesound, Greater Union's production company in the 1930s, based its international marketing strategies almost entirely on these conditions) and many of the problems associated with the New South Wales legislation in particular concerned confusions over possible non-reciprocity for British films in the Australian market.

British film production underwent a marked resurgence in the aftermath of its late 1920s quota legislation, its market share in

Australia reaching 27.1 per cent in 1934, after several years of strong growth.[4] This revival fuelled dreams of coordinated 'Empire' production and preferential marketing; several large-scale plans for such a strategy involved well-placed British loyalists in Australia. Perhaps the most elaborate of these plans to come to a degree of fruition was the establishment of National Productions and National Studios in 1935. The National plan for wide-ranging reciprocal arrangements with other local independent producers and with Gaumont-British in England conjured up a 'last colonial dream'[5] of Empire solidarity in the face of the dominance of Hollywood.

Such instances of the 'Empire connection' in the 1930s could be multiplied. What is significant about them, however, is the way they underline an active, albeit predictable and limited, negotiation on the part of a small and vulnerable industry for the places it might occupy on the screens and in the boardrooms of an 'import culture'.

The films of the 1930s have often been regarded as the most conservative of a generally conservative film heritage. Beneath their bland surfaces, however, a good deal of textual perturbation and negotiation of cultural process takes place, much of it concerned to articulate Australia's colonial or dominion status. Several are simply set in England, or have narratives concerned with inheritance or heritage in which characters journey to England or vice versa: *Diggers in Blighty* (1933), *Two Minutes Silence* (1933), *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934), *Clara Gibbings* (1934), *Splendid Fellows* (1934), *It Isn't Done* (1937). Others play out, often as comedies of manners, displaced British class values within Australian (or, as is the case in *His Royal Highness* (1932), fantasy) settings: *The Hayseeds* (1933), *Lovers and Luggers* (1937), some of the Dad and Dave series of films made by Cinesound. Some films, such as those of Charles Chauvel, attempt to essay large-scale worlds of colonial endeavour across very different settings: *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933), *Heritage* (1935), *Uncivilised* (1936). Let us consider some of this range of films in more detail.

Chauvel's films are the most explicit projects from this period exploring the conditions of colonial existence. The singular connection between Chauvel's 'naive', overreaching or 'high melodramatic' style of filmmaking and the difficult and paradoxical conditions of colonial identity produced three extraordinary films: *In the Wake of the Bounty*, *Heritage* and *Uncivilised*. *In the Wake of the Bounty*, for example, is a 'moral tract'[6] that tells the story of the mutiny on the *Bounty*. It essays the argument that the attempt to sever the tie with the mother country in order to establish an autonomous society in 'utopia' will result in dystopic distortions and an overcompensatory reinvestment in the values of the mother country. (*In the Wake of the Bounty* is explored in Chapter 3.)

A similar, if less wide-ranging, 'colonial' theme can be observed by turning to the most prolific and successful filmmaker active in the decade. *It Isn't Done*, a 1937 Cinesound film directed by Ken Hall, concerns the fortunes of one Hubert Blaydon, an Australian farmer who unexpectedly inherits an English baronial estate, and his family's relation to British social values – what 'is' and 'isn't done'. The film appears a solid, routine Cinesound vehicle for one of its more accomplished male leads, Cecil Kellaway, and features Hall's well-established light entertainment, the 'comedy of manners', the narrative turning on 'fish out of water' routines. Certainly Hall, in reminiscent interviews and during the time of production of his seventeen features for Cinesound, forswore any explicit commitment to projects of 'national definition', which were relegated to categories of 'art' and uncommercial indulgence. However, notwithstanding Hall's disclaimers, the output of Cinesound during the 1930s, with Hall at the helm, deals consistently with metropolis–colony relations, if only, in many films, at the level of the 'comedy of manners'. There may not be as strong a claim to be made for the authorial, when considered with the social and industrial, weight behind such a project as may be claimed for Chauvel, or indeed for charm and eccentricity, when compared with Beaumont Smith. Nevertheless, in a film such as *It Isn't Done*,

a complex interweave of such relations, central to what counts as 'Australian' cinema, is inscribed.

Consider the symmetry of characterisation. Hubert is paired with Lord Denvee as respective 'national' patriarchs, Min Blaydon and Lady Denvee as their wives, and the 'false' Australians the Dudleys are paired with the Ashtons, lower-class English who demonstrate 'Australian' values in the course of the narrative. But it is the transformations and substitutions that provide the motor of the narrative, and the discursive claims that emerge from it. Hubert, played by Cecil Kellaway in one of the most achieved performances of 1930s cinema, moves from unassuming Australian farmer to English lord and back again, largely carrying the film's shifts of tone – comedy, farce, drama, sermonising – with him. He is indisputably the rightful heir, although the contingency of the inheritance is significantly stressed. However, in the central of many neat paradoxes in the film, he 'bastardises' himself in order that his daughter might attain an inheritance in her new 'home' country, by falsifying his mother's name, thus delegitimating his place in English class society. The script does not shy from a piece of rather radical Australian humour in implying, in as explicit a fashion as possible, that the real bastardry here is the English class system. 'Natural' lord is substituted for class lord.

Patricia Blaydon, Hubert's daughter, moves across the national and class divide, but the film's argument is that this will involve an 'Australianising' of the class system. She rejects the 'false', class-oriented, Australian Ronald Dudley and marries the English 'working man' Peter Ashton, after he has passed Hubert's test of what counts as 'class' in Australia, thus assuming Hubert's inheritance. To balance this 'loss', the returning Blaydons gain Jarms, the quintessential English butler turned Australian egalitarian.

However, the final reconciliation is not achieved around comic substitutions and mannerly upstagings but around what was believed to 'truly' effect dissolutions of class and colonial difference: war. *It Isn't Done* trails gestures towards this theme and then

secures it at the end when, unbeknown to each, the Denvees and the Blaydons commemorate the deaths, on the same day in the First World War, of their soldier sons Jeffrey and James. This, the film invites us to believe, is the ground on which a 'legitimate' commonality can be found.

The symmetries are not absolute, of course. The (colonial) paradox of this film is that, even though it is the Australian characters, or those who assume a delegated Australian identity by marriage (Peter Ashton) or by superior insight and identification (Jarms), who undergo transformation, and are thus those on whom the narrative turns, it is the English upper classes whose moral universe remains 'unmoved' and, moreover, who have 'hosted' the transformations. It is only by meeting this universe on its own *terms* that the derived moral universe of the Antipodes can be affirmed. Any reciprocal shift presaged for the metropolis is displaced 'outside' the film, into the future, in the marriage of Patricia and Peter.

The 1940s to mid-1950s: Australian innovation

The 'Empire connection' did not, of course, evaporate in the decades following the 1930s. Indeed, as we will see, the influence of the so-called British documentary movement was determinative during this second period. However, the thematic preoccupations of Australian features certainly shift markedly after an understandably necessary high point of Empire concerns during the Second World War. We will find more consistent articulations of discourses of nationality disengaged from their moorings in Empire–colony concerns. Along with thematic considerations, however, the stress in this section is placed on stylistic innovation. It is a 'bounded' innovation characteristic of an import culture, to be sure, derivative of international ensembles themselves struggling to mark out a place over against the

Hollywood paradigm, but innovation that had a remarkable effect of expanding the conceptual and stylistic horizons of the Australian cinema.

It is important to stress this aspect because the recurring metaphors writers have employed to characterise the period after the war and through the 1960s focus on failure and emptiness: 'the long stagnation' (Lawson), 'interval' (Molloy), 'into the void' (Shirley and Adams), 'bust' (Pike).[7] It is true that the severity of production circumstance during this period cannot be gainsaid. Rationing, emergency measures and loss of personnel to the war effort occasioned virtual cessation of feature production in the years 1940–45. Later, financial restrictions instituted by the new Menzies government in 1951 put paid to a number of promising feature projects, including those of the doyen of the 1930s, Ken Hall. Factually representative of the period were the start and deepening of conservative rule under Menzies and its attendant cultural blackout and mass exodus of film and other cultural talent from Australia; the direct and more covert effects of Cold War anti-leftism on both documentary and feature workers; the exits of the powerful Australian exhibitor Greater Union and the innovative British company Ealing from systematic production plans in the late 1940s and early 1950s; the effects of television and of international financial control and interest in the local distribution–exhibition sector producing an even more entrenched indifference towards support for Australian production than before; and the highly symbolic scandals of certain American 'location' films, particularly *Kangaroo* (1952) and *On the Beach* (1959), dangling the carrot of Hollywood largesse before largely excluded local film workers.

The culmination? During the years under consideration, around two or three features, on average, were made annually, and many of these were produced, directed and/or financed by the English, Americans or, later, the French and the Japanese. This output was constant for nearly thirty years, or more than one-third of the time

films have been made here. However, these elements still don't secure a verdict of achieved 'cultural imperialism'. The factors of locally induced breakdown, as well as locally inspired adaptation and resistance, are too significant to overlook.

There is, considering that severely limited output, an exciting range of film style, format and experimentation compared with earlier periods of more sustained feature production.[8] This can be attributed to two influences: the integration of classical documentary methods and approaches to thematic material, and the first marked effects of the international art cinema on Australian filmmaking. Harry Watt's first two ground-breaking films made for Ealing in Australia, *The Overlanders* (1946) and *Eureka Stockade* (1949), Ralph Smart's *Bitter Springs* (1950), again for Ealing, and the feature documentary *The Back of Beyond* (1954) by John Heyer were hallmarks of the first influence and Ron Maslyn Williams's *Mike and Stefani* (1952) was an excellent example of the second. Putting these two vectors together with a more explicit socialist humanism than usually informed them produced two of the most politically and stylistically innovative reworkings of nationalist archetypes both for the time and subsequently – Cecil Holmes's *Captain Thunderbolt* (1953) and *Three in One* (1957). And through this period the great 'stayer' of the Australian cinema, Charles Chauvel, was making his greatest films: *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940), *Sons of Matthew* (1949) and *Jedda* (1955). Australian features were never more bridled with industrial uncertainty, yet never more innovative!

The Back of Beyond is an outstanding feature documentary: it traces the journeying of Tom Kruse, the mailman on the Birdsville Track in one of the most remote areas of white settlement in Australia. It is well accepted that the film belongs within the stylistic category of that form of documentary inaugurated by the 'British documentary movement' while being, in the words of Ross Gibson, 'a very peculiar adaptation' of that tradition.[9] But the *theme* of the film is wholly concerned with adaptation as well: how does

white Australian frontier society survive in this most inhospitable of ecologies? So, let us play on the word 'adaptation'. *The Back of Beyond* is a superb example of an import culture's adaptation of the conventions of its master stylistic ensemble, the British documentary, insofar as it has found a means of adapting its style to the theme of adaptation.

The Back of Beyond works within the stylistic perimeters associated with the British documentary. These include 'voice-of-God' narration that organises a conventional hierarchy of sound over image, the idea that the 'core' or 'slice' of Australian society that forms the story material of the film is somehow representative of the whole nation, and praise for civic responsibility as a moral 'given'. However, it works significant adaptations of them. Gibson calls its narrative 'minimalist, humble';[10] it could be called 'delegated'. Within a world where survival turns on the necessity to 'tell stories', there is a concerted attempt to delegate authority *from* the God-like narrator *to* the humble storytellers within the film's world (the mailmen, the succession of women who 'communicate' with Tom and his offsiders by two-way radio to the next station, Malcolm, the Aborigine, who retells his past in the area, the Birdsville policeman entering in his diary). Delegation is tied up with an awareness of a gap between the conventions of the British documentary (which produce a romanticisation of heroic civic toil, a heightened degree of typification of character, narrative linearity, and the clear authority of the narrator) and the social and geographical conditions under which these people live their lives. 'Adapting' an aesthetic of romanticisation, there is a consistent *de-dramatisation* carried in the characters' social gestures. Characterisation itself is minimal in the extreme. The superstructure of narrative is classically linear, but the digressions within that superstructure are roomy and at times scarcely motivated by narrative imperatives. A result of these adaptive strategies, as has been asserted, is a degree of delegation of authority to the actual people who survive in this world. *The Back of Beyond* has found stylistic

gestures appropriate to the theme of ecological minimalism in the Australian environment.

Consider an example of this de-dramatisation. This is the sequence where the mail truck is bogged en route out of Marree. Tom and his offsider, William, are travelling at night. The headlights train on a world of threateningly ghostly gum trees. The truck is bogged. The musical motif of the film, the surreal carefree Tin Pan Alley record, plays on the soundtrack, accompanying the men's equally carefree reminiscences about breakdown disasters and their ironically makeshift remedies; shot scale, camera placement and editing position them and their situation as the objects of predatory gazes and among symbols of extinction – the dingo and snake, the cattle skull. Like all major transitions in this film, the reprise to end this sequence is a marked enlargement of shot scale that drives a wedge between the narrative situation and the spectator's grasp of a vast environment – in other words, of involvement *in*, or placement *outside*, the drama of character and situation. The little drama of the predators is not sustained; indeed, we find out much later, when Tom is talking to Jack the Dogger, that he has taken full cognisance of the presence of the dingo, and thus the characters' vulnerability during the 'night bog' sequence has to be reread retrospectively. And this is the case in a number of sequences in the film.

No better example than *The Back of Beyond* can be offered of Elsaesser's notion[11] that social and historical conditions in a particular nation might create conditions for a negotiated difference from the prevailing stylistic paradigm – in this case, the British documentary. However, documentary-dramas, most notably *The Overlanders*, display a similar reframing of the British tradition.

Harry Watt, *The Overlanders*' director, had been a major contributor to the British documentary tradition. During the war in Britain, and then later in Australia for Ealing, he had pursued recreations, fictionalisings, in short, dramatisation of the classical documentary, for which he was criticised by the tradition's 'purists'

in both countries. On the other hand, he was no ideological and stylistic fellow-traveller of the classical Hollywood style, injecting a strongly collectivist-cum-socialist spirit into both his Australian films, *The Overlanders* and *Eureka Stockade*. In this, he was certainly in concert with the ethos of 'Australian innovation' in the post-war cinema. Let us look at the way *The Overlanders* steers a path through these two import ensembles in the creation of a 'classic' Australian film.

The film, set in 1942 in northern Australia, details the story of a 'mass migration unique in history', the movement of cattle herds 2400 kilometres from north-west Western Australia to central Queensland so that they would not fall into the hands of the Japanese. In gross, the film could be read as a western adventure story; certainly there are enough sequences of 'action-spectacle' centring on the hazards of the drove and the courage and toughness of the cattlemen and women. However, the film is at pains to distance itself from its Hollywood generic 'cousin'. To a young Scottish sailor ('Sinbad') struck by the romance of the project, Dan McAlpine (Chips Rafferty) retorts that 'we don't carry guns to shoot up rustlers'. When the same neophyte drover attempts to drive cattle out of a bog, instead of dismounting and walking them out, Dan shouts at him 'Don't try to be a cowboy!' And, in the film's dramatic climax which involves a stand-off between the thirst-crazed mob and three of the drovers, the company's comedian, Corky, is heard to mutter about Dan, 'What the hell's he waiting for, the whites of their eyes?'

But *The Overlanders*' distance from Hollywood can be more thoroughly measured structurally. The film is as intent on imparting information (remember the British documentary's notion of civic education) as it is on captivating with spectacle. Thus, Chips Rafferty's role is split between fictional crux of the narrative, the laconic man of few words and emphatic actions, and documentary voice-over, dispensing detailed knowledge of the technicalities of droving with an earnest loquaciousness. (Rafferty was considered,

on the basis of this and his earlier wartime film roles in Hall's documentaries and Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen* and *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944), as 'the Australian Everyman, in speech, action, and character'.[12]) Moreover, the characterisation of Dan McAlpine does not push masculine individualism to its limit, as would be expected in imitations of the western genre. Watt is very careful to incorporate an active 'bush heroine', Mary Parsons, into the core droving group, and to privilege her horse-riding and droving prowess in certain set-piece action sequences such as her race to the departing plane. In general, the importance to the project of the women, the child Helen Parsons and the black drovers Jacky and Nipper are underscored at various points in the narrative, nowhere more emphatically than during the breakaway of the cattle mob when Sinbad is hurt and Mary and Jacky save the day.

Indeed, the main characters are formed, across the duration of the narrative, into a de facto social microcosm that 'allows' the film to demonstrate the need for a collectivist approach to issues of national development and response to emergency. Apart from the incorporation of age, gender and racial sectors already mentioned, the white males in the 'collective' – Corky, the English remittance man, Sinbad, the disaffected Scottish sailor, and the individualist Australians Charlie and Bert – are either 're-educated' to participate functionally or 'shown the door'. The 'national importance' of such a project of overlanding is emphasised, not merely by the prologue but by the inscription of classical documentary tropes into the fictional surface. Dan proceeds on his overlanding adventure only with the commission of the company's administrator; the need for administrative intervention (the plane with the inoculation officers) is treated not only as grudgingly necessary but as the occasion for potential assistance when Sinbad is injured; and the government minister's speech at the end is shot in such a way as to provide an appropriate contextualisation of the project. Perhaps most emphatically, it is Dan's reply to Corky's 'get-rich-quick' scheme for a 'Northern

Territory Exploitation Company' that secures this national collectivism: development, he argues stridently, is 'a national job, too big for little people like you'.

The Overlanders' stylistic strategies also work to negotiate a path between fictional modes and documentary modes. Concerning the latter, you might observe the intensive location shooting, to the extent of the difficulty of *seeing* what is happening during the cattle breakout scene, which was shot night-for-night. Then there is the principle of rarely framing closer than mid-shot and more usually in three-shot and long shot, which de-individualises and de-dramatises while undergirding the notion of collective characterisation. Finally, the film has an episodic narrative structure which foregrounds the task-by-task overcoming of obstacles rather than individual psychologies.

Compare the one occasion when the close-up is employed as a crux of camera work and editing to dramatise events, the climactic stand-off between the drovers and the mob, with a very similar sequence in *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948). In the latter, a climactic stampede scene is shot with its wide shots 'on location' but its close-ups of the principals in process or studio shots. The drama is an opportunity for the characters to demonstrate riding prowess; the principals of *The Overlanders* dismount to face their major narrative test. The Hollywood film characteristically 'over-dramatises' the natural test by having a main character trampled in the stampede; the threat in *The Overlanders* is survived with a laconic joke.

The strength of the experiments in documentary-drama during this time is borne out in a range of further features, such as *Mike and Stefani* and *Sons of Matthew*. However, this intensity of innovation trailed off in the later years of the 1950s under the pressures of industrial uncertainty and the marginalisation of feature production in Australia.

The mid-1950s and the 1960s: International co-production

This period is usually regarded as the lowest point the Australian cinema reached. In some ominous years in the 1960s not one feature was made. Even the sort of 'positive' reframing that this chapter attempts would typically read the 1960s, for instance, as a time in which the groundwork for the 'revival' was being developed, rather than a period of production as such, just as the late 1950s would be considered as the beginning of a new audiovisual culture with television rather than the end of the second generation of feature film production.[13] A good many of the general industrial parameters pertinent to this period have already been canvassed in the previous section. Continuing the focus on feature production, a general consolidation of factors noted earlier may be seen: feature film faded from agenda-setting debates as television appropriated centre stage; there was further reduction of independent exhibition and even the remotest interest in local production as the major conglomerates, Greater Union and Hoyts, rationalised operations in the 'long siege' with television;[14] and a similar consolidated dominance of now almost exclusively American distribution interests completed the picture 'in the trade'. Even the potential difference of 'quality' art cinema (quaintly dubbed 'Continental' at the time) was diffused and marginalised by indifferent and misconceived marketing.

How, then, was it conceivable for Australian filmmakers to go on working? Never forgetting that film production during this period consisted for the most part of commercials, newsreels and sponsored documentaries, the most significant model established for the feature was the 'co-production'. It is not that this model necessarily produced the 'best' films of the period, but that it was a model in which local production concerns and principals enjoyed more than marginal engagement, and for this reason, and that such films have received scant attention in writings on the Australian cinema, the model repays consideration.

Of interest here are the co-productions entered into by the Southern International company, later Australian Television Enterprises, of which the principals were Chips Rafferty and Lee Robinson: *Walk into Paradise* (1956), *The Stowaway* (1958) and *The Restless and the Damned* (1959), and a much later example of the model in which both Rafferty and Robinson figured, *They're a Weird Mob* (1966). The Robinson–Rafferty partnership represents the first ongoing Australian engagement with international co-production: a significant development in the wake of the slow demise of the Hollywood studio system and the emergence and acceptance of different modes of film production and practice. The Southern International project should be clearly distinguished from the varieties of 'location' filmmaking in Australia in the period (the Ealing features *The Overlanders* (1946), *Eureka Stockade* (1949), *Bitter Springs* (1950), *The Shiralee* (1957) and *The Seige of Pinchgut* (1959), and the American films *Kangaroo* (1952), *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1959) and *On the Beach* (1959) and others) in terms of the degree of production control exercised by the local protagonists.

The paradoxes of this project, however, indicate something of the continuing relevance of our theme of cultural dependency in an import culture. Production control was exercised by Australians in partnership with French (not British or American) interests, but was turned definitively away from local exposure in the light of negligible exhibition potential. The demise of what was initially a successful project was due more to financial overreaching and the internal management of the co-production arrangements than to any more global 'cultural imperialist' notion of disempowerment of Australian film production. It is a project, essentially, of 'exploitation' filmmaking – exploitation of the antipodean as exoticism which nevertheless bears important elements of nationally specific concerns, such as the fortunes of Chips Rafferty's career, Australia's only 'international film star'[15] before the contemporary period. Made for the lower end of the international film market,

the films nevertheless had lavish budgets by Australian standards. Basically 'formula' dramas, they still contain traces of the documentary 'look' that infused the more arresting features of the late 1940s and early 1950s.The problematic industrial status of *Walk into Paradise*, *The Stowaway* and *The Restless and the Damned* is clearly underlined by fascinating stylistic disjunctions. Each film involves a story of white colonial adventure against a 'backdrop' of exotic South Pacific locales, which are treated in stylistic terms as a form of documentary spectacle. But these films are far from the 'integrated' documentary-drama style of some of the earlier films discussed. They, and especially the latter two, employ the overwrought character and narrative structure of the sub-genre known as the 'family' or 'domestic' melodrama current during the 1950s in Hollywood, but insert it into a kind of travelogue scenography that works decisively against the hothouse drama typical of this sub-genre. There is a lugubrious predictability about the staging of each dialogue scene (occasioned partly by the necessity of shooting simultaneous dual language versions for the French- and English-speaking markets) that is broken only by the foregrounding of the panoramic documentary 'look' of their locales – the New Guinea highlands, Panama, Tahiti.

Take *The Restless and the Damned* (known in France as *L'Ambitieuse* and as *The Dispossessed* in Britain). It concerns the story of Dominique, a character-type straight from the domestic melodrama, who plots in extraordinarily complex ways to take over the mining operations of her husband George Rancourt's family in Tahiti. To achieve her 'ambitions' she must seduce, plot and finally kill and be killed. One of her first moves is to befriend and indebt to her Timothy, the foreman at the phosphate mine run by Buchanan, a potential rival to the Rancourt business, whom Dominique must neutralise (she later 'allows' Buchanan to seduce her to further her plans). But before this narrative premise is clear a scene ensues in which Dominique takes a sick child across a sea, through jungle and finally to the hospital, where she collapses from the enormous

exertion! This is a scene of high drama, but it is not staged as such. Instead, the documentary 'look' dominates: languid cutting, with no analytical editing to emphasise facial gesture, extreme long shots of the tiny boat at sea, no 'mood' music. It is a long scene of eviscerated drama, with no narrative premise until we learn, in the succeeding scene, that the child is Timothy's grandson!

Or consider a central psychological strut of the film, the marriage of Dominique and George, the 'ambitious woman' and the 'weak husband'. The marriage undergoes the 'usual' (usual for the Hollywood model on which it is based, in films such as *Written on the Wind*) peripatetics, tied into affairs, seductions, business fortunes, and to abrupt shifts of emotional tenor. Its dissolution builds to a climax as George demands a divorce, Dominique faints and falls to the floor, comatose, and the unrepentant husband squashes a cockroach next to his prone wife! Dominique, reckoning that her financial ambitions cannot be realised if George succeeds in divorcing her, plots his death against the 'background' of beatific natives going to church! George goes out hunting goats, and the blood of these over-determined symbols of slaughter is mixed with that of their hunter as Dominique shoots him. Dying, he shoots her. However, the emotional crescendo having been reached, the characters are positioned in a series of extreme long shots as they stumble to their respective deaths across a 'spectacular' rocky redoubt. The melodramatic denouement becomes the sweeping look of the travelogue.

The character of Dominique, as a reviewer remarked, is a 'complicated' one,[16] but the cinematic articulation required to represent psychological density 'fades' and is displaced in *The Restless and the Damned*. Moreover, the colonial situations that comprise the worlds of all three films are rendered as little more than 'colourful' background material, when they are not the premises for a quite distressingly perfunctory racism. Although the narratorial prologue to *The Restless and the Damned* claims that in the midst of a rapacious and debasing white presence the 'natives' retain

their dignity, this is contradicted throughout the film in the way such 'dignity' is treated merely as perfunctory 'background', and 'local colour' as intersequential linkages between the central narrative of white depradation. So, on both counts – articulations of documentary and drama, and the essaying of the colonial situation – the co-productions seem less achieved, and for good reason, than other projects discussed here.

In many ways *They're a Weird Mob* (1966) presents a very different set of issues of co-production from those of the Southern International ventures. Its British principals were the *auteurs manques*, Michael Powell and Emetic Pressburger, treating an established Australian popular novel by John O'Grady (Nino Culotta). A strange amalgam indeed, but the film commands attention for the way it was carried on such a groundswell of local support. Pike and Cooper remind us that:

> no criticism from the press could erode the novelty for Australians of seeing a home-grown entertainment. After a long 'drought', with no substantial local involvement in Australian feature production for about seven years, the film was eagerly awaited and received much free advance publicity. The film became the focus of a new wave of pressure on the government to provide financial support for the industry.[17]

So *They're a Weird Mob* is a fitting film with which to conclude our discussion of the 'decades of survival', pointing as it does, Janus-like, backward to the international co-productions of the late 1950s and forward to the kind of creature of state subvention that the films of the revival were.

Despite primarily British creative control, the film was promoted and received as an aggressively 'Australian' feature. But such cultural assertion could probably be read from hindsight as muted and qualified. The film, following the book closely, concerns Nino Culotta, an Italian emigrant to Australia who has to take work as

a builder's labourer when his profession, journalism, is closed to him in the film's humorous opening sequences. His orientation to the social mores, linguistic peculiarities and work routines of his 'mates' provides further broad comedy. His romance with Kay Kelly, once he overcomes the misgivings of her father, blossoms into marriage plans.

'*They're* a weird mob'? The film's address is uncertain; at times it is an unsettling ethnographer's gaze at the rituals that bind a social fraction together, at others a wholehearted endorsement of the authenticity of such rituals, all bound together with the ironic self-deprecation of 'Australian' humour. The film might be read as an early harbinger of the yet-to-be officially inscribed discourse of multiculturalism, with its point of enunciation being the estranged view of Nino trying to come to terms with both cultural displacement and class displacement. It could simultaneously be read as a forerunner of the 'ocker' film of the early 1970s in terms of its aggressive yet self-deprecating endorsement of the 'Australian way of life'. It doesn't, however, attempt to separate out these potential frictions, but binds them over into a comic assimilationist utopia of class and ethnic harmony.

The film also resembles the early revival films stylistically, its thin weave of episodic narrative around the romance of Nino and Kay allows for ample displays of cultural idiosyncrasy and an allied profusion of cameo appearances by Australian show-business names. But the episodic quality of the main body of the film makes no claims to a principle of narrative difference in the direction of the art cinema, as the early revival 'period' or 'costume drama' films do. Rather, the meandering ethnographer's purview is displaced in the film's denouement by a strong sense of narrative closure.

Nino goes to get permission to marry Kay from her father, played by the icon of 'Australianness', Chips Rafferty, who, it has already been established, resents 'dago' migrants with a passion. Chips, framed in threateningly exaggerated low angles, is won over by the Australian directness of the 'new Australian'. 'The

Pope a dago!' Chips hurrumps. 'Christ was born in a stable', Nino counters. Father admits he started as a bricklayer, just like Nino. Nino expounds the Australian dream: in a 'new' country, a man can be whatever he likes. Nino wants sons. Father approves. Kay wants daughters. There is then an 'answering' scene when Kay, the 'rich girl', meets Nino's working-class mates, who try to impress her with their attempts at couthness. This scene resolves itself into an 'egalitarian' booze-up. These two symmetrical scenes knit together frictions of ethnicity, gender, the generations, religion and national identification in a 'successful' negotiation and presentation of a 'weird mob'.