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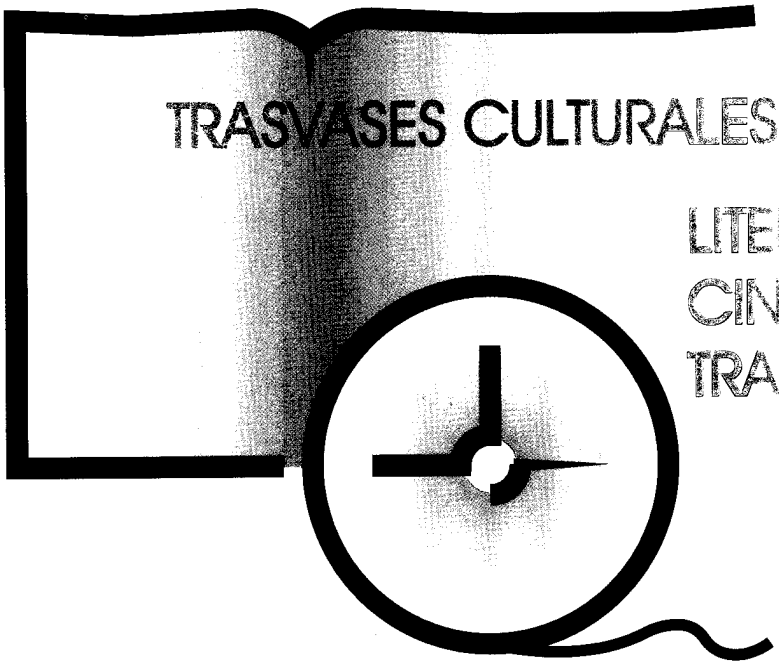

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J. M. Santamaría

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Incorporating American Dreams into Australian Stories: Political Erasure and Cultural Transference in Film Adaptations of Australian Literary Classics

Aurora García Fernández
Universidad de Oviedo

In «American Dreams», one of his most widely acclaimed short stories, Peter Carey examines the conflict experienced by Australians when trying to reconcile their ordinary lives with the American models flickering on screens all over the world as well as the drama derived from exposing one's life and culture for the eyes of foreign audiences avid of new and exotic stories. Through the words of an adolescent and naïve narrator Carey draws a tough and lonely Mr Gleason who hires a troop of Chinese workers to build an exact replica of his hometown and its dwellers which he hides behind a wall. On its removal, some time after his death, the townsfolk react with «a feeling of simple joy» at recognising themselves and their town in the figures of Gleason's *artefact*:

> ... between us and Mrs Gleason was the most incredibly beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life ... I can't remember ever having felt so uplifted and happy... Later [my father] told me he thought Gleason had built the model of our town just for this moment, to let us see the beauty of our town, to make us proud of ourselves and to stop the American dreams we were so prone to. (179)

On further inspection, however, they discover that by lifting up the roofs and peering inside, their most intimate secrets are also put on display for everybody to contemplate. On second thoughts, they decide to have it pulled down, but the city press finds out and the town is turned into a major tourist attraction, with Americans and their bulging wallets flocking into the town. In this way the town's American dreams come true, but only on condition that Australians remain «clownish antics» and their lives a mere performance of the roles assigned to them by Mr Gleason. The story closes with Australian people trapped by their American dreams in the old stories of an anachronistic world they can't leave in case the Americans should no longer bring their money.

This postmodernist fable, in which Carey deals with one of the major preoccupations of his work, i. e. the impact of American culture and economic structures on Australia, anticipates a conflict profusely analysed by Australian critics and cultural commentators after the release in 1986 of Australia's most extraordinary film blockbuster, Peter Fairman's *Crocodile Dundee*. In the decades that followed the country's cinematographic revival of the 1970s, the big issue for Australian popular culture, and feature films in particular, was the negotiation between the American-oriented tastes of Australians and the demands for new and distinct stories that would ratify the existence of such a thing as an Australian national identity. The situation of cultural and political unrest of the period called for the introduction new modes of representation, which, both in literature and in film-making, had to be imported from abroad. In the latter case, mostly from Hollywood, though like with Mr Gleason's model town, the money for the first «pump-priming» mostly came from the public Australian Film Commission (AFC) and the television network. Like the town people in Carey's story, Australians rejoiced at the revival of Australian cinema, which had practically disappeared after the Second World War, with American movies and stories framing the dreams and the imagination of ordinary Australian people. With the exception of old Australian classics, which were rarely released by the American-owned distribution networks (Hoyts and Greater Union), and a few films in which Australian settings had been chosen by Hollywood film-makers for its exoticism –e.g. *The Sundowners*–, Australians had never seen themselves represented on the screen, so they flocked to see Australian films. Only that what they saw in those Australian-biased, locally-oriented «ocker» films was not fully *respectable*, for these films offered a populist and cheerfully vulgar view of Australian society.

Far from pulling down the whole project, however, the AFC tried to make it up for foreign and domestic audiences alike, and the camera was taken from the pub and the adulterous bed or toilet into the library, and, more specifically, towards the shelves of Australian literature. The most famous achievements of that «arty» experiment were *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Peter Weir's 1975 adaptation of a novel by Joan Lindsay, who, on her part, had inspired herself on a famous Australian painting by William Ford (1875), the adaptation of Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), or the adaptation of two Australian literary classics, Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresfore, 1977) and Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, Gillian Armstrong's feature debut (1979). Like Gleason's model town, this cultural experiment brought international attention on Australian cinema, which was acclaimed for the first time in the Cannes festival. Partly as a consequence of this, the Australian film industry specialised for some time in «quality» films, and more specifically in period films, which Dermody and Dacka significantly called the «AFC genre» (1986: 132). These films, lyrically

and beautifully shot, foregrounded their Australianness through the recreation of history and the representation of the distinctive Australian landscape, but instead of inventing new narrative forms, they took to *negotiating* and *transforming* both Hollywood and European art-cinema protocols to tell Australian stories. Thus in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Weir, while breaking with some Hollywood classical narrative conventions –as when he states from the beginning the tragic denouement of the story–, he keeps the essentials of the American thriller narrative in combination with the aesthetic mannerisms typical of European art-films, which he uses to give emphasis to the overwhelming presence of the Australian landscape. By means of long, atmospheric shots and the use of slow motion, we are constantly made aware of the Australianness of the film by highlighting the threatening nature of the bush, one of the major stereotypes upon which the European colonisers articulated their relation with an alien and harsh landscape. But, at the same time, we are also led to perceive a certain spiritual ambience, which, like the European colonisers, we never quite manage to articulate, and which enhances our sense of «horror». Weir's strategy of cultural transference here transcends the limits of imitation, *appropriating*, as a post-colonial author is expected to do, foreign cultural codes which he assimilates and transforms in the process of telling a culturally-specific Australian story like that of white children lost in the bush, which he liberates from the constraints of the colonial gothic narrative.

Similarly, though from a different political stance, in *My Brilliant Career* Gillian Armstrong appropriated international gender discourses to make the film adaptation of a nationalist classic. As a result, she transforms an ordinary –if mythic– «bush tale» of epic endurance in the harsh rural Australia of the late 19th century into a «women's film» which charts not only a young woman's survival of the ordeals of life in the bush, as depicted in the stories of classical Australian writers like Henry Lawson or Barbara Baynton, but more significantly for Armstrong, her resistance to the conventional female roles. Conversely, she uses the Australian stereotype of the tough and strong-minded bush woman to break with the Hollywood convention of representing young women as ugly ducklings who eventually turn into fine swans. Sybilla, like Lucinda in Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, which Armstrong has also adapted into a film, or Muriel in *Muriel's Wedding* is a plain heroine, and her «plainness» is resolutely maintained and emphasised throughout the film. Relying on Miles Franklin's strong characterisation of an Australian bush girl in the novel, Armstrong manages to make her «duckling» desirable to Harry, the handsome suitor, while she also frees her Australian story from the constraints of the Hollywood romance formula when she insists that the heroine, rather than accept Harry's proposal and become a bush wife, remains single and game to start a new life as a writer. This way Armstrong negotiates between the international or feminist code and the Australian cultural code in such a way that she stretches the limits of both

the Victorian and «new woman» narratives, which mostly deal with the situation and traps of bourgeois women, to frame the story of a working-class country woman, a type which is specifically Australian and which is often neglected in middle-class feminist stories.

Directors like Weir, Schepisi or Armstrong were to the history of Australian cinema what the Heilderberg School of painters had been to the development of a national pictorial tradition, when, in the last decades of the 19th century, McCubbin and Roberts, among others, eventually managed to «get the right light» to represent the Australian landscape by «importing» some of the codes of French Impressionism which they applied according to a nationalist political agenda that didn't differ much from that adopted by the realist writers of the *Bulletin School* in their descriptions of the Bush. Following a similar pattern of cultural transference, which consisted in a comprehensive and double-step process of assimilation and transformation of Hollywood and European protocols, Australian film-makers of the second half of the 1970s managed to acclimatise the medium to the social and cultural specificities of Australia, whose stories, old and new, could finally be seen on the screen alongside American and European ones. Those stories and the images of the nation they projected were legitimised abroad by the use of international protocols, while in the eyes of Australian audiences legitimisation stemmed not only from the literary originals and the local casts, but also because, aesthetically, those images bore close resemblance to Australian pictorial classics: many of these film-makers admit to having used the paintings of Roberts and McCubbin as models for their lightning and composition when foreign cinematographic techniques would not do. Apart from that, Australian movie-goers also found that their stories were even with an Australian accent. Not in vain the 1970s were a period of revival not only for film, but also for political nationalism.

As with Mr Gleason's model town, Australian period films were made as a cultured, if romantic, alternative to American stories. This can be appreciated in the way they deal with history: unlike American historical films, Australian period films place the protagonist of history as the victim rather than the agent of History, so that while in the former the protagonist's actions drive the narrative, in the latter the narrative happens *to* the protagonist (Moran & O'Regan 1989: 115), as in the case of *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli*. This historical victimism, which recurs not only in films of the early 80s, but also in the major historical novels of the decade, such as Carey's *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda*, is deeply rooted in the Australian mind since the early days of convictism, but turned out to be poor competition for American success stories and periods films were mostly abandoned by Australian film-makers when government subsidies were substituted for private investments later in the 80s. This brought a new diversity to Australian cinema, for the truth is that most of these films mythologised an Australia which was defined mainly by its landscape and

its colonial history rather than by the complex realities of an urban, multicultural and post-industrial society. However, it also opened its industry and narrative to further American influence, for the domestic market, like Gleason's home-town, was much too small to make the American dreams of Australian film-makers come true, so they began to cater for an audience that was constituted more as «a cinema audience than an Australian audience» (Moran and O'Regan, 130).

This change in strategy brought about significant consequences for the way in which transfers were made between American and Australian cultures. On the one hand, Australian movies had to be more «international», so alternative genres were explored, e.g. the road movie, the political thriller or the western; but, on the other hand, in order to compete with American films, they couldn't bet their bargain on producing mere Aussie «clones» of American films, they had to produce «good clones» that outdid their models in quality and originality. And so they did in cases such as *Mad Max* trilogy or *The Year of Living Dangerously*, which could be read with regard to a film or genre intertext rather than to a specifically Australian social intertext. In this sense, I have to agree with Moran and O'Regan that Australian film-makers have generally proved more successful that their American counterparts in removing or presenting the social texts in their films in such a way that international audiences can relate films to their experience without being forced to embrace foreign dreams, whether Australian or American[1].

Tom O'Regan (1996) claims that *Mad Max* represents the transition of Australian film from the third to the forth stage in Lotman's model of cultural transfer (1990), for it doesn't only «outdo Hollywood on the grounds it knows best», but «it provides original structural models for their respective genres» (221). However, this doesn't mean that Australian feature film as a whole has reached that stage, for he also adds that «the Australian film-making milieu almost naturally presents all Lotman's stages at the same time» (222-3). In fact, Australian audiences still majoritarily prefer American movies and feel unsure about Australian films, unless their success has been sanctioned abroad. This combines with a renewal of Hollywood's imperialist pressure on Australian film-makers to make *American* films out of *Australian* «original» stories, not so much by transferring Australian successful models like *Priscilla* back into an American local context, but by turning Australians into «clownish antics» –to use Carey's

[1] *Mad Max*, for example, has to be interpreted according to the conventions of the road movie sub-genre, but George Miller moves beyond the American narrative of personal retribution when he has the villain killed not by the hero but by a lorry, an extremely common element in contemporary Australian desert landscapes, but which we don't need to read with reference to the local context.

phrase– or by erasing traces of Australianness in order to make those stories more palatable to international audiences. The most obvious instance of the former would be *Crocodile Dundee*, with its coarse –even if parodic– construction of an anachronistic and ridiculous Australian «Tarzanish» Everyman. As for the erasure of Australian marks that may deviate the attention from the American/global to the Australian intertexts, we may mention the case of two film adaptations of Australian literary classics, *The Man from Snowy River* (1982) and *Oscar and Lucinda* (1998).

Sixteen years apart, both films present remarkable coincidences, the most relevant of which is that they both obliterate a great deal of the political content of the original literary works: Paterson's legendary poem «The Man from Snowy River» and Carey's Booker Prize winning novel *Oscar and Lucinda*. In both cases the story has been substantially altered to fit more comfortably into the patterns of the corresponding Hollywood genres: western romance, frontier epic/family saga. Last, but not least, in both films the alterations and erasures operated on the scripts purposefully blur or distort Australian history to avoid any embarrassing comparison or contrast with American 19th century history.

Paterson's poem deals –as many an American frontier tale– with the idea of individual freedom as opposed to the constraints of civilisation, but Paterson's main aim in the literary original is to emphasise the stamina and courage of mountain people, even in comparison with other legendary bush heroes like «Clancy of the Overflow». Underlying Paterson's tale is the story of the many runaway convicts who fled into the wildest parts of the bush, adapted to the hardships of living there and, eventually, became extraordinary riders and horsemen, i. e. top-class Australians. In the poem the mountain boy becomes the «Man from Snowy River» when, with the help of his «hard and tough and wiry» mountain pony, he subdues a party of wild horses which include two of the finest racehorses in the colony. Behind the contrast between horses lies the contrast in colonial Australia between «currency» and «sterling», as well as the conflicts between mountain or poor bush people and rich selectors, a major target of the political artillery of 1890s nationalist writers. In the film, however, the courage and horsemanship of the boy and his exploit is channelled, in a very American fashion, as the narrative drive that will lead the protagonist not only into «manhood» and respect among his equals, but ultimately to the double reward of gaining the heart of the selector's rebellious daughter and a right to claim his father's place in the mountain. Also, in a gross perversion of the political agenda of the Bulletin writers, by the end of the film we find the quintessential bush-hero transformed into a young man of fortune who emphatically announces that he'll be back to claim his sweetheart. Paterson is likely to have jumped himself into the billabong of his not less famous story in «Waltzing Matilda» had he seen his brave hero turned into a family man and prosperous selector, but Australians liked the film, which became one of the

Aussie blockbusters of the decade. This success was mostly due to the fact that Australians were already more familiar with the American legend of the Far West than with the true values and historical roots of their national legend, then undergoing a thorough cultural and ethical revision from different quarters, such as women and ethnic groups. By exacting the American dream of economic prosperity and reinforced family values on a well-know Australian story, Australians no longer had to subscribe to their anachronistic bush myths, while they could still enjoy their unique landscape and some hair-raising riding stunts which Paterson had poetically suggested a century before. Along the process, most of the political considerations had been thoroughly cleansed or cunningly screened behind a Biblical struggle between natural good and evil, and between innocence and bitterness.

Even more surprising and worrying than Miller's odd job with Paterson's poem is Gillian Armstrong's adaptation of Carey's postcolonial epic, *Oscar and Lucinda*, upon a script by Laura Jones. Both narrator and script writer had gained a great reputation with their former work: the above-mentioned Armstrong had been gained five awards in Cannes, and Jones had to her credit brilliant scripts based on literary works like Janet Frame's *An Angel at my Table* or Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*. Their brilliant film output belongs within the field of quality films in which they currently draw from European art-film protocols. Some of these they bring into their version of this contemporary Australian literary classic to capture the contrast between 19th century English and Australian societies depicted by Carey, which is, in fact, among the film's most valuable merits, not to mention the wonderful job of the English and Australian actors or the interplay between music and image. However, as Australian critic and writer Peter Craven has suggested, the film only penetrates the book «fitfully» (26). In all fairness this is partly due to the thematic and technical complexity of the novel, but also to the fact that the incisive social comment and political criticism of colonial Australia is almost forgotten in favour of the romantic story. As with Paterson's poem, this again reverses the essential message of the subversive Australian story Carey told their fellow citizens on occasion of the celebrations of the Bicentennary of the British settlement in Australia. A careful reading of the literary original reveals that among Carey's main concerns was the denunciation of the tragedy unravelled in the country after 1788; a tragedy that had more than decimated the Aboriginals and which the film covers briefly, but quite effectively, echoing several literary and pictorial sources. But according to Carey, colonisation also brought a series of cultural erasures that account for the instability and weakness of contemporary Australian culture; however, this message, though dimly suggested in the opening scene of the film when the weatherboard church «jouneys away from us» (Jones, 3), is virtually impossible to decipher for those who have not read the novel. Even more difficult is to trace in the film Carey's claim that

colonisation was also a tragedy for its White protagonists, for colonial settlers got trapped in a set of imperialist stories and structures they couldn't control or fully understand and that rendered them as misfits, both by the standards of the hypocrite and parochial Australian society and those of the decadent and patronising metropolitan English one.

In Carey's novel, it is the incapacity of the protagonists to get rid of the roles socially and culturally assigned to them that eventually leads into death and tragedy, not only for individuals but for the society as a whole. Carey's story does not mainly contend with the collapse of Oscar's church, but with the failure of Anglo-Australian society to articulate a true post-colonial Australian culture that would compensate for the destruction of the Aboriginal culture and the inadequacy of Christian and capitalist stories to fulfil the spiritual demands the new land and the construction of a new society made on the settlers. This is something that we can't deduce from the film, mostly concerned with the romantic, if extraordinary encounter of two compulsive gamblers. Laura Jones does echo Carey crucial warning that «[t]here are no songs to tell about thistles», but the effect of that echo in the first scene of the film is shamefully counteracted at the end when the narrator passes the story onto his daughter, and Oscar's death is compensated with Miriam's. In Carey's novel Miriam does not die, but claims Lucinda's fortune and appropriates her rights in the *making* and *telling* of the family's history, but this postcolonial Australian ending was changed in the Fox adaptation of the novel for a traditional American one, where the «vamp» gets her desserts and the heroine the reward of a son she brings up to avoid his father's «childish» fears and become the heir of a glass-manufacturing emporium.

For all its careful framework of cultural and historical references to the Australian context, in Armstrong film, American dreams of success filter too conspicuously into an Australian story originally conceived as a nightmare. Had the film ended with Oscar's death, mainstream audiences would probably have been disappointed; by incorporating the Hollywood-like happy-ending coda, the film obliterates an essential message of the novel, which takes the film back into earlier stages of development of Australian cinema, which confirms O'Regan's theory of the co-presence of Lotman's four stages in the Australian film-making milieu.

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