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Cultural Intersections in Early Australian Sound Films: *Rangle River* (1936)

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Current notions of global cinema trends mention genre blending as a strategy for maximizing international distribution. However, global genre merging has a long history and can provide a rough map of the borders of international cinematic identities. The 1936 Australian film *Rangle River* combines a generic Hollywood Western plot with an English drawing-room comedy. Two different male characters, an Australian ranch hand and an upper class Englishman, largely provide the differences that trace these identities. However, like the blended narrative, the opposition of the two modes of masculinity overlaps and combines the local and the international. In this way, the film traces some of the different international influences and heritages that comprise Australian cinema and identity. This paper is an initial attempt to look at such films and see how competing ideas of national narrative and identity emerge in a blended cinema.

Novel and Film

This film is based upon a short novel by U.S. Western author Zane Grey. Grey wrote *Rangle River* after a visit to Australia and is set in post World War I Queensland. In the novel, Marian Hastings, a wealthy young Englishwoman, arrives to claim her inheritance, the titular rundown ranch left her by a deceased, unsuccessful uncle. She conceals her wealth, restores the farm, and fights off the local bandits with the help of mysterious English expatriate Dick Drake. They fall in love, of course, and plan to marry until he finds out about her wealth. This obstacle is eventually overcome, leading to a final romantic scene. The novel emphasizes the European settler experience in Australia. The act of digging a well acts as synecdoche for the whole idea of settlement, of taming the land and making it bloom.

The marriage of the main characters introduces and eliminates the class issue; in Australia, it seems, the relative wealth of the two lovers is not so critical to their happiness. This “classlessness” is presented as a contrast to the England they have left behind. However, at the same time that the two forsake English class mores, they admire English traits they find in each other. For Dick Drake, Marian represents the best of England, in terms of recalling memories of places and emotions he has not experienced in Australia. Marian embodies for him all that is idealistic about England. This act of renouncing class structure while retaining and romanticizing aspects of England, like the landscape, or afternoon tea, represents a type of rewriting and adaptation that characterizes the dialectical process of identity formation at work here.

The film version differs significantly from this. *Rangle River* is a thriving ranch, owned by the elderly Hastings. Drake is now the straight-talking, hard-fighting, extremely competent ranch foreman. The river is dropping, the cattle need water, and Drake tells Hastings they need to dig a well. He finds that his employer is sending the money for this well to Marian, the gadabout daughter of the house, who is traveling in England with her paternal aunt.

Angered that Hastings is sending money to Marian, Dick writes her a letter urging her to come home, and blaming her for the economic troubles at the ranch. Marian returns with her aunt, and an upper class Englishman, Reggie Mannerling, who has fallen for her and tricked her into offering him an invitation to the ranch. Their

arrival coincides with a fistfight between Drake and a man from a nearby ranch. Reggie cheers Drake on, and even prevents a second man from joining the fight against Dick by hitting him on the head with a piece of wood. Reggie finds this two-against-one behavior "Not sporting." Over the course of the narrative, Reggie's admiration of Dick increases and Dick reciprocates as he learns to appreciate Reggie's specific talents.

A duplicitous neighbor engineers the threat to Rangle River Ranch by damming up the river, depriving them of water for their stock. Drake and his men dig a well, which the neighbor's men destroy. Reggie is the only one at the ranch who notices the oddities that accompany these misfortunes befalling Rangle River. His intelligence discovers clues linking the neighbors to the failure of both river and well. Finally, he rents an airplane, flies over the area, and locates the dam. He notifies Dick, and when the neighbors realize they've been found out, they blow the dam, apparently drowning Reggie in the process. Dick finalizes things with another fistfight, and winds up with Marian. As they embrace, Reggie turns up, having survived the flood by grabbing onto a log.

Generic Combinations

Zane Grey visited Australia and recast a western tale onto the map of the outback. The film uses a generic grid to create a variant of the American west in Australia. This "American western discourse" sideslips into an embodiment of an intrinsic "Australianness" through the film's juxtaposition of outback "rough and ready" action sequences with several English drawing room comedy sequences. This cinematic hybrid creates and defines national identities through the enactment of different modes of masculinity, each of which embodies different skills, knowledges, competencies, and ways of speaking. However, these masculinities are fluid constructions that allow the two male leads to move easily between the different generic sections, although the dominant male character differs in each section.

Hybridity is an oft-cited condition of Australian film, suggesting that it exists in what Rama Venkatasawamy calls "constant movement between various available coordinates of the local and those of their external referential points."¹ Tom O'Regan also uses notions of hybridization in discussing the "inventive solutions" Australian cinema uses to solve a "problem" (so-called) of being on the margins

of the dominant western cinema, the U.S., and in terms of Art Cinema, being on the margins of Europe.² The movement of which Veknatasawamy speaks could also be conceptualized as a dialectic—one that operates in *Rangle River* to pinion several identities at the borders of discourses of nation and gender.

Venkatasawamy also raises the issue of the antipodal condition, and how it constructs a site for “cultural and cinematic reproduction of texts and discourses,” and how “peripheral (read antipodal) platforms are eventually transformed into minor centers ... or stopovers on the way to the centric core.”³ He raises the issue of growing up in a “simulated America” as well. O’ Regan also discusses this idea of imitative cinema and the anxiety it may provoke among Australians about identity, while noting, however, that this “imitation” exists in films that some audiences also perceive as original.⁴

This idea of simulation or imitation refers to filmic icons, specific generic conventions and technical inclinations of a film, elements that form the dominant common ground of film producers and audiences. These identify films as part of a certain cinematic culture, such as that of mainstream Hollywood. But do those available “cinematic coordinates,” that is, mainstream Hollywood, match the “cinematic territory” of Australia?⁵

In the case of *Rangle River*, “Australia” exists through signifiers that form common motifs in a number of outback films. The configuration of the landscape, the native vegetation, the ranch setting, the need for physical labor, the prevalence of drought years, and the importance of water sources construct the outline of the outback. The signifiers that delineate the American west and the Australian stock country do share some characteristics. This does not necessarily imply that an Australian film like *Rangle River* would be seen by audiences as a cheap imitation of a Hollywood genre film. The fact that the gendered national identities in this film exist as “Australian” and “English” provide a specific context that emphasizes the cultural and national histories of those two nations. While it is also true that the United States emerged from a British colony, as did Australia, the different historical trajectories of those two colonial relations cannot be conflated.

As in North American westerns, the traditional, much-discussed tension between “civilization and the wilderness” exists in Australian

outback films. Some films from this group identify such a polarity between the outback and the large cities of Australia. Others, like *Rangle River*, identify this tension as one between Australia and Europe, specifically Britain.

During the historical time period referenced by U.S. Westerns, the binary nature of “civilization vs. wilderness” seems to have settled into an intranational dynamic, since the United States had been independent of Britain for more than a century. However, Australian independence and incorporation as a nation is much closer to the time period of these 1930s films. This I think, helps cement this particular generic signifying system into an Australian-Britain duality. However, this statement needs to be tempered by the fact that there are also some outback films from this period that do use the coastal cities of Australia as the signifier of “civilization.”

The subtle shifting of signifiers of this textual tension reminds audiences that this is not a “western”. While there is some overlap of generic characters, there is a distinct difference in the group as well.

The presence of indigenous peoples of the two continents also figures in the respective narratives of the Australian outback and the Western territories of the United States. However, the structural presence differs greatly. North American western films notably feature Native Americans as threats to civilizing influence and the manifest destiny of white settlers. By contrast, the Australian aborigines appearing in outback films are hardly physical threats. Indeed, a common motif of older outback films is the brief appearance of aborigines as narratively undeveloped, unrelated background or extras as ranch hands, for example. *Rangle River* follows this model as it includes a brief, undeveloped shot of aborigines singing near the film’s beginning.

Instead of a “simulated America,” the relationships of the now native Australian characters and the English visitor, construct an iteration of Australianness that articulates the contradictions and tensions of a society that is post-colonial but not post-revolutionary.⁶ The ability of characters to sustain elements identified as “European or English” with “Australian-identified elements” creates a cohabitation of the two identities, which oscillate in importance throughout the film.

Hybridity in *Rangle River*: The Return of the Native

The English emigrant lovers of the Grey novel become “native” Australians in the film version. As the film opens, Marian Hastings is visiting Europe because her father wanted her to acquire cultural advantages that he felt were missing in Australia. Dick Drake is a plain-speaking, ranch foreman who writes to Marian to inform her that her frivolous travel and dress budget are ruining Rangle River Ranch. Marian comes home after this letter to assume her place on the ranch.

Homecomings in Australian films of the 1930s emphasize the unique qualities of the place. Frequently, a shot of the newly completed Sydney Harbour Bridge, as in *The Squatter's Daughter* (1933), serves as an icon of place. Shots of the Bridge also reference the idea of modern industrial accomplishment, and the expansion of the settlers' hold on the land, as the Bridge opened up North Sydney for easy access and urban development. The shape of the Harbour Bridge is unmistakable and still serves as an icon of Sydney.

In these films, the narrative device of the Australian returning home reinforces the distance between Australia and Europe, and specifically England. In films, people from Australia go to England for culture, for refining, for medical care, and for “world experience,” as does Marian in *Rangle River*. The idea of the homecoming itself produces a sense of complexity in terms of identity because the traveler always brings back something of the places she or he has visited.

Australian Landscape

In *Rangle River*, the landscape is important, as in any ranching tale landscape becomes “other” to the humans by threatening the register of the social which is being constructed in relationship to it (landscape). The importance of landscape in considerations of Australian identity can be illustrated by its relationships to several other discourses in addition to film.

One of the most explicit indications of the importance of landscape in Australian images comes from the opening title cards of another early sound film, *The Squatter's Daughter*. In part, this message reads:

“A message from the Prime Minister:

. . . The picture breathes the spirit of the country’s great open spaces and the romance, adventure, and opportunity in the lives of those who in the past, pioneered and are today building up our great primary industries. Australia, scenically, is unparalleled—it has the breadth and atmosphere of healthy optimism and progress, and I sincerely hope that viewing the picture will create in the minds of its audiences added interest in the Commonwealth and the great future that undoubtedly lies before her.”

In *Rangle River*, landscape and its lack of water provide a large part of the plot structure. Water becomes a commodity that ensures the economic exchange of another commodity—cattle—between the rancher and the meatpacking firm. Through this type of exchange, the landscape, countryside, and the realm of nature are linked to industrialization and settlement.

The film’s ranching story bears other similarities to ranch narratives produced in Australia during the first three decades of the 20th century. The lack of water for stock is also part of the *Breaking of the Drought*, a silent film, and the “take-charge” woman on a ranch or in the outback, is part of *The Squatter’s Daughter*.

From Australian painting, this film and other ranch narratives takes the idea of the lonely figure in the landscape.⁷ This image represents a human figure overwhelmed by the Australian landscape; such figures are lost, abandoned, brave, and/or pioneering. Images like this evoke both fear and awe of the land and the determination of the white settlers to claim and “make productive” this landscape. Shots of the cattle-drive, and of Dick and his men riding through the empty land around the ranch, reconstruct this particular representation in the film.

The ways that landscape is involved in “productivity” also construct and define work in *Rangle River*. Work is one of the crucial constructions in this film and other outback films; a strong labor identity is an important aspect of Australian postcolonial identity. Labor identity, which comes from work, has been identified in British films as being related to the ideological underpinnings of gender. John Hill identifies the element of hard physical labor as one aspect

of work that had secured masculine identity in British working-class films.⁸

However, in *Rangle River*, any type of work on the land such as with the cattle or finding water, can cross class and gender divisions. This fluidity also constitutes a difference between British and Australian gendered identities as hard labor in the outback cannot be confined just to the working classes, or solely to males. The landed “gentry” of the outback must labor as well. When Marian takes the step of becoming a good cattle wrangler, she constructs an Australian feminine identity that demonstrates its difference from the European lady she embodied in her opening scenes.

Dick Drake, ranch foreman, and Marian Hastings, wealthy daughter of the house, find mutual ground in this work, and the common way that they identify their importance and usefulness within the landscape cements gender and romance as well. Only after Marian demonstrates her willingness to work and shows some degree of skill as a horsewoman and cattle wrangler, does the romance between her and Dick progress. After her first attempts at work, she even identifies herself to Dick as “an Australian cattleman’s daughter.” This statement places her within the national and the family unit. It also reconstructs her labor identity.

Instead of occurring during one of the outdoor sequences, this statement occurs during an evening dinner party in which Marian is dressed in an evening gown and Dick is wearing a suit for the first time in the film. These dinners form a large part of the English drawing room comedy sections of the film. The cementing of Marian and Dick’s relationship through their common “Australianness” demonstrates that cohabitation of identities that the film constructs.

Masculinity

Labor identity and gender are reciprocally defined in the film, and the national construct of gender shifts as the necessity for a new labor identity emerges in the Australian landscape and in the Australian social community. Both the male leads—Reggie and Dick—define specific aspects of masculinity in terms of their talents, competencies and usefulness. At first glance, Dick’s brand of masculinity seems ideal for the landscape of Australia. However, Reggie’s character reveals certain traits, still firmly anchored in English identity, that yet prove useful in this new land. This makes

sense, within the film's system, because the white settlers of Australia were English, and their ability to settle the land must derive from their background and history. However, now that they are in Australia, they have built upon their "English" knowledge and competencies through familiarity with the land, and its flora and fauna. Australia must become distinct from its English inheritance, however, so it becomes necessary to differentiate and separate the two national identities.

Reggie is defined as an upper class Englishman through his accent and his attitude. He is a "sporting man" in two ways. First, he believes in good sportsmanship and therefore prevents a second guy from entering a fight against Dick Drake. Secondly, he is sporting in the sense that he is willing to give things a go as we see when he cheerfully volunteers to mount a horse to help with the stock drive. His comic inability to manage a horse and whip for driving the cattle clearly differentiates him from the Australian Dick, who is totally at ease with animals and physical activity.

Reggie also demonstrates considerable intelligence. He is the sole member of the dinner-party group to realize that an explosion in the distance is not thunder because it did not cause any static on the radio. He finds blasting wire at the dried-up well and notes the coincidence between the timing of the beef contract and the drying up of Rangle River. He has mechanical competence and experience with "modern" machinery because he can fly a plane. He uses this ability to track down the neighbor's dam that is blocking the water from the River.

Reggie is also highly verbal. He engages in a running battle of wits with Marian's Aunt Abbie. These exchanges occur during the generic English drawing-room comedy scenes. A comic motif develops through Reggie's continual attempts to impress Abbie with his wit, or with humorous anecdotes of his travel experiences. She usually wins these exchanges by simply refusing to admit that there is anything funny in his talk. This deliberate failure to recognize connotations, double meanings, hyperbole and other verbal tropes disconcerts Reggie. His usual ability to impress verbally falls on purposefully deaf ears.

The character of Dick Drake enacts a version of Australian masculinity that seems, at first, to completely oppose Reggie's Englishman. When the two first encounter each other, Dick is in the

midst of a fistfight that occurs at a cattle round-up. A ranch hand from another ranch has questioned Dick's authority, and Dick settles this question with a fight. Reggie, along with Abbie and Marian, drives up as the fight begins. This scene is Reggie's introduction to the ranch. He expresses great admiration for Dick's prowess as a fighter, and as mentioned above, prevents a second man from helping Dick's opponent. While doing this, Reggie remains leaning on the fence in an indolent posture. His manner of taking the club from this man is nonchalant and seemingly effortless. This action belies Reggie's lack of surface aggression; it becomes clear that he can participate in a fight. As he stands there, he expresses his admiration for Dick's ability to fight.

Dick's handling of himself during the fight clearly lies within the two-fisted self-reliant male who depends upon his strength to settle disputes. He handily defeats his opponent with minimal damage to himself.

Later that evening, Reggie visits Dick in the bunkhouse specifically to express his admiration of Dick's fighting skill. While there he helps Dick tend to his very minor injuries, which allows Dick a chance to express his admiration of Reggie's talents: dexterity and verbal skills. The two men bond through mutual admiration of complementary skills. Dick's accomplished fighting style reappears in the narrative near the end, as he beats up the neighboring rancher who has caused all the trouble for his employer, Mr. Hastings. The film seems to be setting up a crude dichotomy between the rough outback male and the polished Englishman. However, the rest of the film's action blurs this boundary.

Reggie's verbal skill finds its opposite in Dick Drake's inarticulateness, especially with Marian. While Reggie is perfectly able to engage in social banter, Dick can barely speak to Marian. This is particularly noticeable in scenes where they are alone and not working. If Marian is engaged in some appropriate ranch task, Dick is able to speak to her. However, if she is alone with him, and the conversation threatens to turn more intimate, Dick loses his ability to speak. The exception to this occurs during one of the dinner party scenes, when Dick appears wearing a well-cut suit.

During this scene, he accompanies Marian to the verandah, where they exchange apologies for their previous rude comments. Marian makes a comment that she is an "Australian cattleman's

daughter, sir,” verbalizing the cementing of her identity to Australia, the outback, and the labor of the ranch. They shake hands, an action Dick finds comfortable as opposed to his nervous response to Marian’s later, mild romantic overtures.

Changing Identities for a New Landscape

The appearance of an articulate, stylishly dressed Drake constructs a masculine image that fits perfectly with the drawing-room comedy section of the film. His ability to move into this type of narrative and construct an appropriate character while retaining elements of his outback persona constitutes yet another cinematic sign of gender dialectics. Just as Reggie reveals talents that contradict his drawing-room fop traits, so does Dick reveal traits that contradict his initial construction as a rough outback ranch hand.

Two narratives of masculinity, one based in rugged, outdoor masculinity and the other based in verbal dexterity and manners, blend and cohabit the same landscape. This particular cinematic landscape demands a certain category of physical labor, the labor demands a slight realignment of gendered work, which also embodies a new, Australian identity that draws upon but adds to the English identity.

Ultimately both representations of masculinity prove necessary for “saving the ranch,” as does Marian’s rejection of European ways for the hardworking life of a ranch woman. Her ultimate rejection of Reggie for Dick cements her as an “Australian cattleman” and puts the English Reggie on the margins of this grouping of landscape, labor, gender, and nation. Through its blended narrative, *Rangle River* demonstrates how generic categories of North American western and Australian outback film merge through gendered actions, which themselves are defined through the specific landscapes of such films. This generic borrowing and blending helps us map the movements of international cinematic models as well as the movements of national identities.

Notes

¹Venkatasawamy, Rama. *The Hybridity of Filmmaking in Australian National Cinema: Formulating a Cinematic Post-Diaspora*. (<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/rama/index.htm>.) 1996, p. 1.

²O'Regan, Tom. *Australian National Cinema*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 110.

³Venkatasawamy, p. 4.

⁴O'Regan, p. 109.

⁵Venkatasawamy, p. 2.

⁶Lawson, Sylvia. "Toward Decolonization: Some Problems and Issues for Film History in Australia." *Film Reader 4*. (1979), p. 53.

⁷Dermody, Susan and Elizabeth Jacka. *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema*. Volume 2. (Sydney: Currency Press, 1988), p. 21.

⁸Hill, John. *British Cinema of the 1980s*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 168.

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