Tripping on the Light Fantastic: a bit of a look at Australian film

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In the beginning is the word: there has to be a script. But even before a word is said there's light, and camera, and action.

Films are before all else about light, and about what can be realised through light. That pre-eminence of light was acknowledged in the old-time movie theatres, in the custom, now regrettably lapsed, of having the projection illuminating the screen before the curtains were drawn open, so that the promised world of light could be glimpsed before revelation, symbolically seen through a veil which then parted — and behold, a new heaven and a new earth. Those who arrived late, after the houselights had gone down, followed their own little subdued pool of light, the usherette's torch, down the carpeted aisles.

What the film shows, what the camera has seen, is what we also come to see — the already realised. It is there waiting for us, a pre-existing given, a re-presentation of the dance of light, understood by its reference to that other world we have, for the moment, turned our backs upon, a world reviewed askance. And when the image before us approximates to the one behind us (the great outdoors?) then we might well wonder where in the world we are. The new wave of Australian film, which has deliberately eschewed the stylised and formulaic, and which has not yet solidified into conventions of its own ('What's matter but a hardening of the light?' as the poet David Campbell so incisively observed), has made such an interzone of freedom its own — as it has also taken liberties with it. Australian films dance impertinently on the edge of the outrageous, they are subversively quirky. They characteristically say more than one thing, and not always in a way that the rest of the world will readily catch on to: Mick Dundee doing his sheepdog-in-the-race routine in a New York subway, for example.

When the word is out, when the script derives from a novel, then the situation of the reader/viewer becomes even more intriguing, as does that of the film-maker. The choice of response becomes that much more complex, the cross-referencing simultaneously a re-inforcement and yet a further elaboration, film increasing the perception of the novel, the novel enlarging the inner explanations of character and circumstance. Though they may not be necessary to each other, the interconnection opens up an opportunity of advantage for the audience. And in any case, both are concerned to articulate a vision to the audience: in D.W. Griffith's summing up, 'above all to make you see'.[1]

In the case of Australian films and Australian novels, one feature in particular is inescapable. When we conceptualise Australia as space, we think of it as outside the measure of time. For Europeans to discover Australia it was necessary to appreciate that time is distance; and in its local manifestation, that this is the timeless land, being both very big and very empty. Yet just as importantly and persistently we see it, envision it, in terms of light. No dark continent, light is all about us here: there is a land where azure skies are gleaming with a thousand dyes, etc. It is a commonplace of Australian art history, and certainly a recognised motif in our literature as in our various national songs, that for us light is inescapable. The standard histories all draw attention to this. Bernard Smith reads the emergence of the Heidelberg school of painting in terms of impressionism's preoccupation with light, *plein air* painting, and the symbolic importance of sunlight. Roberts, Streeton, Conder, McCubbin and company were intent on achieving a distinctively Australian art through the effects of light and colour; and sunlight, the sun itself according to Smith, came to occupy a key place in the *mystique* of Australian nationalism.[2]

1 Quoted in George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p.1.

2 Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.82.

Brian Elliott's *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1967) is an extended reading of the Australian poetic imagination in terms of Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country', with its emphasis on sunlight and the visual. Light suffuses the narratives of the explorers and colonisers as of the novelists — White and Stow, Keneally and Carey, whomever. Even the night skies are admired for their brightness. The Southern Cross is emblazoned on the Australian flag (existing and projected), Paterson's Clancy of the Overflow exalts 'the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended/ And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars', and there is — sometimes — an aurora Australis.

It would be surprising therefore if Australian film were not in its turn to have discovered for itself the revelation of light. Yet a cursory review would suggest that Australian film-makers did not at first altogether understand what was available to them. In part, no doubt, that had to do with using a studio; and the belated discovery of colour. Historically, Australian film-making was locked in shadows, from the dark moral landscape of *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1908 and again in 1927) and the grainy, grimy streetscapes of *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1919) through to say the imaginatively constrained adaptation of *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1960) and all those Chips Rafferty movies in between, where at some point or other half the inhabitants of the Healesville Sanctuary seemed to have escaped on to the set. That was a world of melodramatic oppositions, black framing white, the good owning the lighted spaces, like the Rudds' selection in Ken Hall's Cinesound productions in the 1930s. Not until, like the painters, the Australian filmmakers came to terms with the possibilities of colour and location, the film equivalent of the *plein air* tradition, could it be said with any confidence that we were now masters in our own picture-house.

The comparison with the Heidelberg painters is apt, for the new wave of Australian movies came with a comparable moment of increased national self-awareness. But it also comes with a specific reference to that original impetus. *My Brilliant*

Career (Gillian Armstrong, 1979) and *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresford, 1977) were both adapted from novels from the turn of the century, but of the slightly antecedent period, the celebrated and nationally self-conscious era of the Heidelberg school; and in doing so they adopted appropriate cedar tones. They make a point of opposing figures constrained in interiors against figures more naturally in a landscape (Jane Campion is still doing it, in *The Piano*, 1993 as in *Portrait of a Lady,* 1997). They are from time to time noticeably picturesque, and in this they follow the model set by the inescapably allusive *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975). The affirmation of a new wave of national self-confidence came not through the crudely assertive idiom of Blinky Bill (the flag — which flag? — hanging out of his overalls pocket) and ockerism (for all John Meillon's monopoly of the part), though admittedly some of that was inescapable: targeted as that was in Michael Powell's 1966 adaptation of 'Nino Culotta's' *They're a Weird Mob* (1957, and filmed in the excruciating 1960s colour register now probably remembered more commonly from the cover-pages of the *Australian Women's Weekly*). It was also extravagantly manipulated in Bruce Beresford's *Barry McKenzie* films (1972 and 1974), where idiom and situation derived from Barry Humphries' London successes. These films, just like their sources, used Australia but didn't reveal it: the reality lay behind the language and the light. The screen here acted as a filter, not a reflecting surface. But setting aside such anomalies, on the whole what can be discerned in the new wave of Australian film beginning in the seventies and continuing for the next quarter-century is a positive enthusiasm, a claiming for ourselves of our own project — which means seeing ourselves in our own terms, and making our own statement under our own conditions.

Picnic at Hanging Rock signals an important turning point. It made no apology for being Australian. But that does not mean it insisted on its parochialism. On the contrary, it found the very means by which to transcend the limitations of the parochial, by exploring as its *modus operandi* intimations of the transcendent. It was cleverly and deliberately painterly in its

portraiture — apt as a period reference but also as a coded reclamation of the local, i.e. national. The set camera shots of the Rock itself, with the morning haze about it, across paddocks of shining summer grass, captured exactly the dreaming — the Dreaming? — that informs say Streeton's famous and familiar landscapes.[3] At the same time it invoked, as did Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel, classical Renaissance art, specifically through the central textual and pictorial reference to Miranda as a Botticelli angel. That combination of reference elevates the otherwise somewhat conventional theme, of the incomprehension of Europeans of the vagaries, indeed the mystery, of Australia. Gubernatorial garden parties, wealthy English scions, beds of pansies, even the extraordinary white swan, these things do not belong in such a place; and the imposition of a rigorous and unsympathetic English educational regimen at Appleyard College is the most untoward of all. It has no connection with what is here; its whole discipline is unnatural, antipathetic to the burgeoning young girls who, on their Valentine's Day picnic, are released from it. Young Sara Waybourne, try as she might, cannot get the lines of Mrs Felicia Heman's 'The Wreck of the Hesperus' to stay in her mind. It is a silly poem, it has no sense. She has however composed her own poem, and is prepared to recite it; but the Headmistress will hear none of it. Mrs Appleyard is for discipline, regulation, control; she admires the masculine mind of the mathematics teacher (who, significantly, is 'oblivious to the vagaries of the Australian scene', p.7, the point being not only the contestation between two points of view but that the Australian scene is characterised

3 Neil Rattigan among others has noticed how *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is 'consciously constructed with an eye toward pictorial composition. Many sequences commence with action in frozen tableau as if in a painting, and this highly structured *mise-en-scene* is integrated with a deliberately hesitant approach to dialogue (especially by the use of silence) and with an editing style that utilises long dissolves and a rhythm that frequently holds shots and scenes slightly beyond their "natural" moment...' *Images of Australia: 100 Films of the New Australian Cinema* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991), p.250.

by its resistance to precise definition, its vagaries). Sara is overfull of feeling trying to express itself. The confrontation between them is a paradigm for both the circumstance of the plot and of the film itself, striving to find a way of presenting its own native vision. And what it does is to appropriate to itself, and own, what ought to be the distancing factor of the exotic.

The film, using soft focus and filmy light effects, is able to heighten the sense of allure, the very thing that the colonisers cannot control. They do not understand it; its incomprehensibility is a sign of their failure, in their own terms; just as the interlocutor in Shaw Neilson's poem 'The Orange Tree' cannot see or respond to the light the young girl listens to, or just as Dorothea Mackellar had deduced: 'An opal-hearted country,/ A wilful, lavish land —/ All you who have not loved her,/ You will not understand'. Helen Morse, superb as the *sympathetique* French mistress, makes the point of interconnection between the opposing worlds.[4] An exotic herself, she is both sensitive to the allure of the indigenous, and she recognises the continuity with the European — it is she who makes the connection between Miranda and Botticelli's vision. Miranda has a serenity that is of this world but knowledgable of another, and Mlle de Poitiers' gasp of recognition is charged as much with shock as with excitement (p. 21). But where the novel has Mademoiselle unable to think let alone explain what she has recognised, and lapsing instead into drowsy thoughts of love, the film brings up close the source reference in a book she is looking at. The likeness is impressive; but (and here is one instance where film has an advantage over print) whereas the narrative comment can only give an instance of a particular kind of beauty, being able to see the reproduction of the Botticelli figure at the margin of the painting changes the kind of signification that is available. The text turns its attention to the escape from time (Mademoiselle's lover is the local

[4] For a variant reading of the confrontation see J.A. Wainwright, 'Desolation Angels - World and Earth in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*', *Antipodes* 10.2 (December 1996), 121-3.

jeweller, everyone's watches are stopping, the universal languor turns into a sleep, perchance a dream ...) but the visual representation permits a fuller study of the figure, and supplies one point of access into Miranda's enigmatic signification. For looking if just for a moment at the reproduction of Venus rising from the sea, we glimpse what Walter Pater recognised long ago, that these Botticelli figures display a beauty enriched and even ennobled by the sad transcending awareness of humanity and mortality. The artist is conscious of the shadow upon loveliness, just as he is conscious that imaginative colouring is no surface quality but inherently expressive of the spirit.[5] What Miranda knows is not unearthly, but of the earth.

This film, then, is no twee canter into the fashionable uncanny, but a sensitive and intelligent encounter with, and acceptance of, that aspect of 'vagary' inherent in the Australian scene. Miranda's remoteness, her 'difference', lies in her position in both narrative and film as emblematic, just as are Botticelli's angels. They are not etherealised figures; they belong in this world, for all their superior calmness and serenity. The pan pipes of the film's score capture this aspect exactly. Where the pipes of Pan might be thought to excite pagan sensuality of some kind, here is nothing of passionate arousal (cf. the almost ungainly rapidity with which all those at the picnic sink into sleep — the novel can evade those inelegancies). On the contrary, the haunting quavering theme expresses more a lament, a plaint. Details such as these suggest that to read the film, and the novel, as some kind of parable about awakening sexuality is to have come to a very limited response indeed; a reading which holds on to because it cannot get past the thrusting rocks and the abandoned stays.

The allure of the film for the viewer, as for the reader of the novel, is that in each case the text engages with a version of the question 'where in the world are we?' and in each case the answer is resisted. The mystery of what happened is not solved,

5 Walter Pater, 'Sandro Botticelli' in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873).

in part because in historical fact (and who cares about that?) the mystery was not solved, but more importantly because the representation is about mysteriousness, the ineffable. That alone is something, to establish the ineffable in Australia; and the point of the present argument is that it is achieved through the transfigurative potentiality of light. But also, for the Australian audience, we are between an image and the known, between a book and a film, between a film and a familiar landscape tradition. The film's narrative is carefully incomplete, just as the published novel was, famously, incomplete — Joan Lindsay's unpublished chapter providing a 'solution' deriving from yet another textual source, the metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan's 'They are all gone into the world of light'. The possibility of an explanation may disappoint, as suggesting closure; yet the 'explanation' itself opens up new mysteries.

What Joan Lindsay has done, and Peter Weir followed, is to interrogate the familiar Australian experience of the noonday hush, the endlessly disconcerting moment when all sound abruptly ceases and time for a moment is arrested as in some trance. Poets as long ago as Charles Harpur in the old colonial days not only commented on this remarkable characteristic of the Australian bush, but noted further that at such moments, far from succumbing to languor, his thoughts formed a synthesis of mood and perception ('A Midsummer Noon in the Australian Forest'). That is, just as under the agency of Australian light we find a way into the imaginary through mirage, so too in the middle of the day the rule of nature appears to reconstitute its boundaries. Under the shimmering light that falls on Hanging Rock new enlarged possibilities are opened up to those who are sensitive to them. And likewise under all that persistent brightness, that opening up of the boundaries of the real, a corresponding broadening of the quotidian is evoked. What can be discerned is, as Patrick White explained, 'the extraordinary within the ordinary'[6] that not only makes tolerable the prosaic life, but invests it with significance. And just as the range of

6 See Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', *Australian Letters* I.3 (1958), 37-40.

White's characters include the heroic and the absurd, the epic and the simple, the visionary and the farcical, so too — and for precisely the same reasons, and under the same agency (for White's novels too are incandescent, filled with light) — Australian film characters also flirt with touches of caricature, extravagant eccentricity, the freakish.

From the larrikin clumsiness of Arthur Tauchert's Sentimental Bloke to the various yokel versions of Dad and Dave, the raucous grotesquerie of Roy Rene's 'Mo' and the disconcerting grimaces of Ernest Borgnine as 'Roo', Chips Rafferty's bean-pole meeting its match in Bruce Spence's Stork, there is an endless line of caricature figures, almost a circus carnival intruding into and distorting the domain of the ordinary. Neva Carr-Glyn's scuttling old crone in *Age of Consent* (Michael Powell, 1969) for example, is at quite a different level of representation, almost a real-life cartoon figure, while Helen Mirren flaunts the state of nature in Dunk Island's translucent waters and James Mason works it all into an artistic vision (Norman Lindsay for once sending himself up by having the artist fail to see the connection between life and vision). As *Picnic at Hanging Rock* progresses, it turns away from its preoccupation with light and landscape and the transcendental, and gradually transforms from an elegant film essay into a kind of colonial romance with elements of farce, with a dour Constable Plod leading the search party and trying to uphold law and order where that — in both the natural and metaphysical sense — appears to have evaporated. He looks like a figure out of *The Magic Pudding*, or a music-hall skit; and Colonel Fitzhubert with fez and monocle and affected speech impediment is similarly a stage 'property'. We see here as elsewhere the playfully self-conscious Australian penchant for taking up strategies from the theatre, just as we play with language in our more colourful vernacular.[7] Furthermore, the

[7] But Bluestone, pp. 6-7, quotes Erwin Panofsky as arguing that instead of emulating theatrical performance, the earliest American films were folk-art, animating popular incidents of the gruesome wax-works, pie-throwing or mildly pornographic postcard kind.

comic sub-plots and the extravagant minor characters are persistently in some way or other linked with this factor of light, as though the excess of light permits or even invokes the fantastic — much as that persistent feature of the landscape, the mirage, is a function of light, and simultaneously an apparition and some kind of transferred reality, for it is there and everyone can see it. Just as the curious quality of Australian light is to transform and reveal the surrealism of figures in the landscape, so too it shows their other aspect, the angular and grotesque. In this sense David Campbell lays down as axiomatic that 'The surrealism of our landscape shimmers in the Australian mind'.[8] Like the mirage, these strange figures stretch the imagination. They are not so much larger than life (the heroic ideal) as broadening the range of life possibilities — by contrast, perhaps an egalitarian ideal.

The evidence is everywhere. *Storm Boy* (Henri Safran, 1976) stunned Australian audiences with the beauty of its photography. Here was an entirely new perception of Australia, and in that extraordinary and overwhelming light a pelican, Mr Percival, becomes as much a character as Fishbone, a reclusive Aborigine (David Gulpilil). It is as though through the potency of the light the balance of things is transfigured, and bird, boy and Aborigine meet on common ground. Here was another film that enabled us to see our place, and ourselves, in a new light. So too the vista behind the titles of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), great rolling ridges of New England, a far cry from the monotonously familiar blue hills that had dominated previous film images. These hills contain Jimmie's sacred grounds, they are the site of an alternative scale of value which the white world contests. It was a serious film about a serious topic, and it followed the novel quite faithfully — but then the novel was already structured in a way that lent itself to filming. The kind of transference I have been identifying occurs with Thomas Keneally, author of the source text, acting the part of the cook. When his thoroughly familiar

8 David Campbell, Preface, *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1968; 1973), p.[5].

public face breaks across the accepted imaginary of the film, the divide between art and life breaks down and we are forced into a more inclusive acceptance. Another film which made a play of light, and incorporated a somewhat exotic figure, was Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983), where archetypal patterns and political realities are acted out in terms of the shadow puppet plays, and the whole with a running commentary from Billy Kwan, a half-Chinese, half-Australian dwarf played, in an award-winning performance, by a woman (Linda Hunt).

'Above all to make you see.' That of course has been a long and honourable intention in Australian film, not always successful. Charles and Elsa Chauvel's rather earnest and unlucky *Jedda* (1955) is in film terms endlessly about barriers — the film is dominated by canyons, cliffs, great slabs of rock — and can find no way of relief, no imaginative release as it moves towards its inevitable tragic end. Darkness, wickedness, the undesirability of the 'other' in this well-intentioned but now somewhat questionable study of the Aborigine, preclude the possibility of seeing in a new way, of finding an informing light. Instead, there is the re-inforcing glare of the pre-determined. Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971) set out to change all that: this was a film dedicated to revelation. It begins with an apocalyptic fire, John Meillon setting light to himself and a perfectly good Volkswagen out in the desert, having driven there with his children, apparently on a picnic, all the way from Sydney. This is clearly the never-never: the wrong sorts of animals clump about thousands of miles from where they might be expected, and a fastidious Jenny Agutter manages to walk with her little brother all the way from the back of beyond to the old uranium township Batchelor, abandoned but with well-watered lawns. We know where we are with this film: we are at the movies. Yet Roeg did succeed in showing something new, in registering the landscape as more than photogenic, expressive. For example, in another Freudian touch, the forks of gum trees suddenly become crotches, both through witty photography but also with relevance to the young girl's awakening awareness of sexuality. The *piece de resistance*,

however, is David Gulpilil's butterfly dance, a set piece of extraordinary power and beauty, every bit as moving and as lyrical as say the death of Madam Butterfly, so that we forget for the moment the film that encases it. Here too, in the bright light of northern Australia, is beauty conscious of the shadow upon it, Gulpilil's distracted dancer trying to peer into the other shadow in which the white girl cowers. Both the episode and the performance transcend their circumstantial context (and far transcend the source novel co-authored from James Vance Marshall's fieldnotes, *The Children*, 1959, reprinted as *Walkabout* in 1961), much as a splendid aria leads us to ignore the absurdities of operatic convention and posturing. In this film, what some have seen as disjointed, sentimental and ludicrously implausible, is better viewed as a merging of the fantastical and the real, reality re-arranged to disclose the new possibilities inherent in it, the transfiguration of the real into something approximating the surreal.

Anything can and does happen in the extraordinary far outback: that is where the prophets are to be found, where men may aspire to be God and find themselves truly humbled, profoundly lost. Under the desert skies the light burns at its purest. Ray Lawrence's *Bliss* (1985) relocates the site of the surreal and the transcendent to the city. Again the film sets us the problem of determining just where on earth we are; and where we are is in a story, and inside a character who has just died. We know this not just because the voice-over of an aging Harry Joy tells us so (Barry Otto sounding uncannily like John Hinde), but also because the camera view is from high above Harry lying on the ground, lying as though fitting into those chalk marks that show where a victim was. Harry is in exactly the same alignment when the branch of a tree falls on him and he dies all over again — death is such an absurdity — but the voice-over is discreetly silent on the other occasion the camera hovers over Harry sprawled like that, after his first sexual encounter with Honey Barbara. That is a little death; one of the many jokes the film makes in the spirit of Peter Carey's 1981 novel. Another is to cast Manning Clark as a preacher, which is type-casting indeed, as the famous historian not only looked the

part, but tended in real life to present his own narratives from the pulpit of himself. It is not inappropriate in a film which, even more than Uncle Remus' tales from the old South, is all about story-telling, the art of narrative being as it were the plot as well as the theme. The eminent historian can be viewed as acting out a version of himself and calling it into question, given that as Mark Twain famously observed, Australian history is the most beautiful lies.

What novel and film alike explore is how the real merges into the fantastic, the surreal. 'This is the story of the vision splendid', the narrator intones at the beginning of the film, and invoking both Wordsworth and Paterson. The opening vision is seen as through a mist, of a church in floodwaters (Carey already contemplating the key image of *Oscar and Lucinda*) and Harry's mother who has successfully prayed for rain, standing in a barge like a Tennysonian cowled knight, or high priestess, or Charon: serene life-giver and death-figure at once, and in any case a construct of Harry's retelling of his father's retelling of a favourite story. It is not her meaning, but the presence of narrative, splendid visions, that functions here and throughout. Harry, arrested by police because he had been driving a vehicle in unroadworthy condition (an elephant had sat on it; the urban myth actualised) can not be released until he tells a better story, one they have not heard before. Harry's wife is determined to get to New York, where according to the story Harry tells, there are towers of glass. Harry's inverted apotheosis follows his attempts to test the truth of the story he appears to be inhabiting, and to discover whether or not he is in hell (he is, but it is his life). Story is the reality; and the whole of the film is the story Harry tells his children, of how he won and lost and then won back again the love of their mother, Honey Barbara. And in turn, narrator outside his narrative, the daughter tells us, as a detail in another story, that Harry is about to die, and how. She speaks with the voice of confidence and assuredness; she speaks from the unlit void. Hers is not a story in Harry's splendid vision, but about it. Inside that envisioning, each story offers its own illuminations, its own splendid vision; here, film does not control story, story drives film. Within the

novel however, Carey has tried to construct film images, 'scenes'; the novel tries to do what film does, and the film retaliates by taking over and enacting fiction's primary function of narrative.

There are different kinds of illumination. At the hospital for the insane, shock treatment brings on 'a blackness you can't imagine' — and as death has already been imagined, with Harry sliding between spaces in the air (though the camera appears to be racing through pond weed), then that unimaginability is unimaginable, shocking. In the film as in the source text, nothing is more to be feared than the cessation of the imaginable. In film as in novel, nothing is more necessary than to establish the ground of the imagined. In this case, Carey's Brisbane slips to Lawrence's Sydney, though with houses carefully selected for their resemblance to old 'Queenslanders'. Given that altered location, the louvred hospital windows, the tropic lushness of the gardens and the heaviness of the rainfall, the proximity of the rainforests and even Harry's signature white tropical suit don't make a lot of sense. The conflicting signals don't usefully destabilise us in the way in which the switch from normal to abnormal register does, as when the action relocates from traditional suburban house to postmodern hotel, or when the patrons keep on eating their lunch while Harry's wife and his partner Joel apparently copulate unnoticed on the table — the table-service evidently not as good as Harry liked to remember. When Bettina visits Harry in hospital straight after this luncheon date, the camera drops to below the bed and we see lots of small fish falling to the floor between her ankles. It is a macabre wit, which makes a telling moral point in a surrealistic manner. Less witty, but just as telling, is his son David suddenly in Nazi uniform as David exacts certain favours from his sister as the price of a deal. This is a world which operates by a discernible visual logic, an interpretative commentary which is certainly not normal, nor is it cartoon-like, but somewhere in between, lucid, illuminating, articulating a controlling moral intelligence.

For curiously, it *is* a moral tale. The moral pattern — the unhealthiness of the city as cancerous centre, both actually and metaphorically, countered by the organic wholesomeness of Honey Barbara and the alternative lifestyle — provides a structure in a world where the basis of meaning has come under question, yet the possible sentimentality of that is undercut by the black humour. Light patterns support the moral design — the movement from interior to exterior shots, from houses to trees and forests (and the war-zone between, the glaring sunlight of a burnt out rainforest which Harry must cross before he can enter the hippie haven), extraordinary camera angles to indicate resistance to the claims of conventionality, and so forth. But by reverse argument, the film's insistence on discovering and inventing pattern, finding connections between images, reinforces the sense of life, or of how life is managed by organising meaning, so that what is presented as witty is also deeply important. That doubleness is thoroughly characteristic as the mode of Australian expression.

The colour and the flamboyance and the sheer adventurous playfulness of the Australian idiom are just as characteristic of Australian film. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994) is on the face of it high slapstick with bitchy one-liners, acid comedy. Totally over the top, the film is characterised by flamboyant costume and draperies, lurid colour and deliberately hammy acting — for the characters are actors imitating acting. The excess artificiality is the film's comic signature. Here is a huge pink bus going west, just like in the Village People's song, with a great rooster-tail of cloth billowing along behind. It is like a magician's trunk: it couldn't possibly hold all those wonderful costumes and props. Unreal. Contrary to the Hollywood trope, the city lights are being left behind as they head out into the bigger, more lurid light of the desert, chasing their own mirage and camping out under the stars so to speak. They are lighting out for the Territory. The light register of the film shifts from early subdued colour to the increasing glare of the great open spaces and comes to its climax with the extraordinary colours of the desert sunset. But the show must go on, and these moue-ing queens must return to

the stage. 'Bernie' takes a chance on real life; the others return to the Sydney night-spots, and the camera increasingly positions itself behind them, facing the audience — facing away from us, the other audience — watching them work through their routines: one step back, two steps across, bob, etc., and then cuts close-up so that we see them coarse-grained, joyless, a disdainful twitch on their lips, their eyes watchful. Close-up we see what has been concealed — the look behind the mask beneath the too heavy make-up. The film offers a more complex view than immediately appears, a study of performance as subsuming a way of life.

Happier by far is the comparable ABBA routine from *Muriel's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994; in passing, one speculates about this continuing fascination with ABBA, that perhaps they strike us as imitations of themselves, they delight our sense of the improbable — they were singing mirages); or the equally colourful *Cosi* (Mark Joffe, 1996), a film of a play about an opera, again with actors as characters imitating actors who are taking on characters: arguably, the translation into film marks out an important extra dimension that would not be so evident on stage. And as with *Priscilla*, there are two layers of reality, two norms, with the inmates of the asylum showing more sense of life and liveliness than those who are supposed to be looking after them. Barry Otto, in a wonderful cameo role as Roy, long time inmate, obsessed, in some sense mad but also sensitive, an unrealistic creative neurotic who nevertheless brings all sorts of insight to light. The spectacular success of the inmates' performance, full of light and colour and music, is not so much a transforming apotheosis as a consummation of imagination and desire, where the regular and the irregular, the commonplace and the elevated join together in something which is pantomime and harmony at the same moment: the fantastic realised in vision splendid. And the appositely named *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) — from Pink Floyd's 'Shine on you crazy diamond', a long way from Rachmaninov but perhaps just around the corner too — continues this celebration of the vagaries in our cultural landscape.

Film is not reality, but it might be if you look sensitively enough. The closing scene of one of the first of the new wave films, *My Brilliant Career*, shows Sybylla (Judy Davis) looking out over the farm gate, out into the softening sun. It is a key image for us: we know just where we are. There is openness all about here, possibilities. 'It never ends, does it? — all that space', 'Bernie' is moved to say in the climactic sunset in *Priscilla*. Light measures space, and it illuminates potentiality, enlarged possibilities. It affirms for us the vision splendid. Light is all about us, and light is what we are all about. Where in the world are we? In this light, the light that constitutes film, and makes us see, the world is all before us, and we are free to make of it what we will.