

Cambridge University Press
0521542561 - Australian Cinema after Mabo
Felicity Collins and Therese Davis
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Australian Cinema and the History Wars

1

Backtracking after *Mabo*

Backtrack: (vb). 1. to return by the same route by which one has come. 2. to retract or reverse one's opinion, policy, etc.

The familiar yet estranged figure of the black tracker has enjoyed a certain longevity in Australian cultural traditions for it easily corresponds with the metaphor of exile and imprisonment in a purgatorial landscape, identified by Graeme Turner as one of the key tropes of Australian fiction. However, with shifts in the Australian social imaginary that accompanied the Land Rights movement of the 1970s, the tracker receded into the background, a result, perhaps, of a critique of racial stereotypes initiated by Aboriginal activists and critics. In 2001–02 the black tracker made an unexpected return to Australian screens in two feature films, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002), and a short musical film, *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001). In both features, an iconic actor of the 1970s, David Gulpilil, was cast in the role of the tracker.¹ His startling, intense screen presence haunted *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and dominated *The Tracker*. After a period of relative obscurity (save for smaller roles in *Crocodile Dundee*, Peter Faiman, 1986; *Until the End of the World*, Wim Wenders, 1992; and *Dead Heart*, Nicholas Parsons, 1996), Gulpilil's return to the screen in two key films of the post-*Mabo* era, like the films themselves, can be understood as a kind of backtracking, a going over of old ground in Australian national cinema, a going over which reprises and at the same time retracts some of the seemingly intractable figures of Australian national identity.

In this book, we use 'backtracking' as a key term to describe and interpret Australian cinema (and to a lesser extent, television) in the twelve years since the 1992 *Mabo* decision overturned the nation's founding doctrine of *terra nullius* (i.e., land belonging to no one). However, from the outset, we want to be clear that this is not a book about the *Mabo* decision itself or the representation of Aboriginality in Australian cinema. It is a book about the cultural rather than political impact of a paradigm shift in Australian historical consciousness. The *Mabo* decision is central to this

shift because it forces Australians to rethink 'race relations' and the colonial past as integral to what Tim Rowse describes as a morally illegitimate national identity.²

Australian colonial histories show that, from day one, European settlers/invaders recognised the fiction of *terra nullius*.³ This is evident in their encounters with Aboriginal clans in possession of land, initially in coastal areas and later in the interior, which the British had presumed to be inhospitable and therefore 'empty' of human life. Yet, as Henry Reynolds argues in *Aboriginal Sovereignty*, 'the advantages of assuming the absence of people were so great . . . that legal doctrine continued to depict Australia as a colony acquired by occupation of a *terra nullius*.'⁴ Racist assumptions about Aboriginal culture provided the basis for the continued non-recognition of Indigenous ownership of the land. As Reynolds puts it: settlers/invaders saw Indigenous people as primitives 'who ranged over the land rather than inhabiting it.'⁵ Despite a history of Indigenous resistance to dispossession, supported at different times in the nation's past by a number of non-Indigenous Australians, the story of the nation's origin, in the occupation of land belonging to no one, remained intact until the High Court's *Mabo* decision in 1992.

This landmark legal decision to recognise the pre-existing property rights of Indigenous Australians created shock-waves across the nation as non-Indigenous Australians were forced to confront the fiction of *terra nullius*. As Justice Brennan wrote in his summation of the case: 'Whatever the justification advanced in earlier days for refusing to recognise the rights and interests in land of the indigenous inhabitants of settled colonies, an unjust and discriminatory doctrine of that kind can no longer be accepted.'⁶ Events over the past decade have shown, however, that neither the *Mabo* decision nor its subsequent enactment has settled issues of land rights between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.⁷ On the contrary, non-Indigenous Australians find themselves on unsettled ground as we come to terms with the fact that our democratic society has a serious flaw. One public nationwide poll done for the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in early 2000 showed that a large majority of people (80%) feel that the process of reconciliation is important; but they are strongly divided about how the process should proceed. For example: 'In principle, 57% agreed and 37% disagreed that a reconciliation document might help relations between Aborigines and the wider community. But only 28% favoured giving the document a legal status.'⁸ In 2004, Australians remain divided on a range of post-*Mabo* issues, including: the legal and financial implications of recognition of Indigenous Australians' prior ownership and sovereignty; the idea of collective blame and the need for an official apology for past injustices; proposals for what

the Howard government calls 'practical reconciliation' – that is, strategies for overcoming the startling inequities in Indigenous health, employment, education and rates of imprisonment.

Politicising History

The *Mabo* decision is at the centre of an unprecedented politicisation of history in Australia. The 'history wars' are being played out in the public arena, in which competing sides attempt to explain Australia's past and determine how best to remember it. These history wars are not unique to Australia. In the wake of 20th-century genocide and other forms of atrocity, many post-industrial societies are having a similar debate, struggling for answers about how to explain unspeakable episodes from the recent past, and how to remember them. Indeed, cultural theorists see this struggle over the past as integral to the paradox of modernity whereby we valorise progress while simultaneously lamenting the loss of a safer, more secure past. In recent times, referred to as late modernity, obsession with the past has intensified, resulting in what Andreas Huyssen calls 'the globalization of memory'.⁹ Huyssen's description of this culture reminds us that in daily life we are bombarded by invitations to remember the past through popular global memory of the Holocaust in films like *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), a new wave of museum architecture, the rise of autobiography and memoir writing, retro fashion, the History Channel, and so on.¹⁰ The past is, quite literally, closing in on us to produce what Huyssen calls 'an ever-shrinking present'.¹¹ At the same time, Huyssen reminds us that 'while memory discourses appear to be global in one register, in their core they remain tied to the histories of specific nations and states'.¹² Since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre twin towers on 11 September 2001, it is tempting to focus primarily on global relations. Certainly, this is something the Howard government did in the lead-up to the 2001 election. But as Huyssen argues, all nations are faced with 'the task of securing the legitimacy and future of their existing or emergent polities', and one of the main ways they do this 'is to commemorate and adjudicate past wrongs'.¹³

In Australia, the history wars have centred most intensely on past treatment of Aboriginal peoples and the politics of land since the *Mabo* decision. One of the first major acts in the politicisation of history in the wake of *Mabo* was Prime Minister Paul Keating's Redfern Park speech (1992). Keating's assertion that 'we took the traditional lands', 'we brought the diseases', 'we committed murders' radically altered the terms of the nation's

self-understanding.¹⁴ The Prime Minister's acknowledgment that 'we', the present generation, should take collective responsibility for colonial forms of violence and subjugation was an initial step in the process of reconciliation between settler and Indigenous Australians. But Keating's speech also outraged many Australians, especially neo-conservatives, including Opposition Leader John Howard.

To understand why neo-conservatives oppose Keating's assertions about the past, we need to go beyond the underlying concept of moral responsibility and consider the speech in the broader context of Keating's Republican agenda and his politicisation of history. Keating's aim, indeed his personal passion, was to shift Australia's identity away from a British-centred past to a history grounded in Australian experience. Earlier in 1992, Keating had accused Britain of deserting Australia in 1942 at the fall of Singapore. Mark McKenna suggests that Keating's anti-British agenda can be read as a 'useful means of transferring responsibility for the evils of colonialism from Australia to Britain'.¹⁵ In this light we can better understand why neo-conservatives see Aboriginal reconciliation as such a threat to the nation. Keating's assertion of a moral flaw at the heart of national identity not only demands a response from present-day Australians. It also brings into disrepute the nation's British heritage upon which national identity has been so proudly based, thus revitalising the Republican call to cut all ties with Britain.

For these reasons among others, neo-conservatives sought to defend the old account of Australia's past as a nation of well-intentioned, hardworking British settlers. In his 1993 Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture, Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey introduced the phrase 'the black armband view of history', claiming that there was a crisis in Australian history: 'a swing of the pendulum from a position that had been too favourable to an opposite extreme that is decidedly jaundiced and gloomy.'¹⁶ Howard seized this view and pillaged Blainey's speech, incorporating phrases such as 'the black armband view of history' into his own rhetoric. By the mid-1990s, the history wars were in full swing. Public debate over issues such as the Stolen Generations, frontier conflict, school curricula and the National Museum confirm that history is no longer a dying discipline in schools and universities but an issue of national importance. Individual historians such as Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey have become national figures, while high-profile journalists such as Christopher Pearson and Piers Akerman, and public intellectuals such as Robert Manne, Tim Flannery, Germaine Greer, Ron Brunton and Peter Howson are strongly identified with either the left-liberal or neo-conservative view on how best to explain the nation's past, how best to remember it.¹⁷

Cinema after *Mabo*

How then do we begin to think about Australian cinema in the post-*Mabo* era? What part does cinema play in the national process of reviewing our colonial past and rethinking the ways in which settler and Indigenous cultures can coexist? This book investigates the extent to which Australian cinema, in the aftershock of the *Mabo* decision, has reprised its role as an arbiter of national identity by going over some old ground. This backtracking is literal in the case of the landscape tradition which anchored national identity to British settlement of the land. It is also metaphorical in the case of a miscellany of films which have a common interest in the problems faced by settler and Indigenous peoples of being at home in Australia, whether home is located in the bush, the suburbs or the outback, or is conceived as local, national or international terrains of action. And whether 'being at home' after *Mabo* is understood in terms of coexistence and recognition of a sovereign First Nation within the Second Nation, on the Canadian model, or post-colonial reconciliation based on a moral rather than legal understanding of Indigenous-settler relations.

Influential writers have analysed the anxiety and ambivalence which seem endemic to Australian nationhood and to Australian cinema.¹⁸ However, the cultural impact of the *Mabo* decision (and the peculiar forms of anxiety about the nation's past and future to which it has given rise) has not yet been analysed in terms of cinema. In this book we are preoccupied with the issue of how the Australian cinema has mediated historical memory and national self-recognition in the wake of the *Mabo* decision, as well as related events such as the 1997 *Wik* rulings on *terra nullius* and native title, the Stolen Generations report, National Sorry Day, the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics, and the 2001 centenary of Federation. If the false belief in *terra nullius* can no longer be maintained as the blind spot in Australian national history, how has the cinema (as the cultural flagship of national identity) begun to revise and retract its established (some would say exhausted) tropes of national self-recognition?

At one end of the media spectrum, the televised opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games was a particularly self-conscious media event, integrating an Indigenous dreamtime as the pre-history of the nation. In turn, the nation's history was allowed to unfold as a montage of masculine archetypes, from the robust stockman-on-horseback to the lawn-mowing man of suburbia.¹⁹ At the other end of the entertainment spectrum, the national cinema of 2000–02 produced a cycle of films concerned with Indigenous-settler relations.²⁰ Rather than a celebratory

montage of national archetypes, this cycle revised certain familiar figures such as the black tracker, the lost child, the bush battler, and the Australian landscape itself. If many of these films seemed strangely belated, already out of date at the time of their release ten years after the *Mabo* decision, it was partly because the subsidised national cinema lacked the immediacy of television, radio and print media. This belated quality was partly an effect of film-funding policy. Proposals dealing with the unpopular subject of the nation's colonial past needed to overcome commercial resistance to Indigenous-settler stories in order to qualify for production funding. Further, from the perspective of national cinema, films featuring Aboriginal characters tended to revive an Anglocentric version of the social imaginary at a moment when the economy and popular culture were moving decisively into a post-national, cosmopolitan mode. However, if we look at these same films from the international perspective of late modernity, it becomes clear that Australian films dealing with traumatic events in national history have been very timely. As a genre of international cinema, Australian films have become part of a global, media-based politics of memory, where national traumas like genocide are now being understood in terms of the failures of Western modernity.²¹ For us, the term 'after *Mabo*' implies a national cinema that, in various ways, tells us what it feels like to be living in the 'afterwardness' of colonialism during a moment of intense globalisation.

Key Concepts

In this book we propose that Australian cinema is one of the public spaces in which Australians have been able to experience the impact of the *Mabo* decision as a national 'shock of recognition'. We argue that cinema enables collective and intimate forms of recognition which have a different impact from legal and political recognition. Our understanding of post-*Mabo* cinema is informed by Walter Benjamin's theories of history, modernity and shock. Benjamin argues that there is a structural affinity between the montage principle of film – the rapid juxtaposition of images – and the alienating effects of modernity, making film an embodiment of the peculiar shock effects associated with the rapid changes of modernity.²² Benjamin's understanding of film and modernity is closely related to his concept of the dialectical image and historical consciousness. For Benjamin, the past makes itself evident in dialectical moments where the past and present collide, where, in his words, 'the past flashes up in the instant it is recognized and never seen again'.²³ He cautions, however, that we should not confuse these moments of 'recognizability' with the idea of seeing the present in terms of the past,

of assuming a continuity between past and present. Rather, these flashes, in which the past becomes visible, arise out of *recognition of discontinuity*. It is precisely this recognition of the *Mabo* decision as a rupture in the continuity of Australian history that informs our understanding of Australian cinema after *Mabo*. The shock of recognition of historical discontinuity entailed in the *Mabo* decision provides the impetus for us to propose a new way of thinking about the relationship between Australian cinema and a post-*Mabo* politics of recognition. This approach to a contemporary national cinema has the advantage of providing a way for us to backtrack over some well-worn debates about Australian national identity.

In their ground-breaking study of Australian cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka deploy the concept of a 'social imaginary' to account for historical modes of spectatorship in national cinema. In this study, we use concepts of shock, recognition and trauma to define a post-*Mabo* social imaginary grounded in memory. We refer to memory in four different ways: historical memory as the chronological ordering of events; involuntary memory as a chain of associations incited by shock; remembering the past as a work of mourning in the psychoanalytic sense; and repetitive, belated memory associated with historical trauma. In the following chapters we draw on theories of memory and trauma cinema in order to answer the question posed by Radstone and others: 'why these films now?'²⁴ More particularly, why these films, here, in this national cinema, now? We are interested in questions of how 'unintegrated traumatic memories may impede recognition of present traumas'; of trauma's 'internal conflict between the pre-traumatised and traumatised self'; of trauma as 'the layering of several experiences rather than the impact of one'; and of the role trauma films may play 'in their spectators' integration of trauma, mitigating individualised isolation and creating empathy with the suffering of others in the present'.²⁵

Apart from the influence of current research into memory and trauma films, our concept of recognition and memory in cinema is indebted to Miriam Hansen's reprise of critical theory's approach to cinema as an intimate public sphere of experience. Drawing on the writings of Benjamin and Kracauer, Hansen's work offers an alternative to film theory's concept of cinema as a place of voyeuristic and fetishistic identification. Her historically grounded ideas are particularly useful for rethinking the ways in which history, recognition and memory continue to be so central to our experience of Australian national cinema as a 'vernacular modernity'.²⁶ The following readings of *Black and White*, *The Tracker* and *Black Chicks Talking* (Leah Purcell, 2002) will clarify our use of the interrelated concepts of Australian cinema as a public sphere for reprising or going back over established themes

of national history, as a site for the politics of recognition, and as a traumatised space of public memory.

History and Storytelling in *Black and White*

At a forum to launch the Melbourne season of *Black and White*,²⁷ the director, Craig Lahiff, and actor David Ngoombujarra discussed two different concepts of history informing their film about the landmark 1959 trial of an Aboriginal man, Rupert Max Stuart. Whereas Lahiff was concerned with transforming complicated historical events into a feature film, Ngoombujarra considered Stuart's story to be just one of many 'hidden stories' waiting to be told. This contrast between history and story indicates two different possibilities for cinema as a public sphere. In his writing on storytelling, Benjamin emphasises the difference between historical remembrance (Craig Lahiff's approach) and epic memory (David Ngoombujarra's approach).²⁸ For us, it's not a choice between history as coherent remembrance and storytelling as epic memory, but rather a sense of how they are both operating in *Black and White*.

From the factual point of view of historical remembrance, Stuart's death sentence for the rape and murder of a nine-year-old girl in Ceduna, South Australia, was commuted into a fourteen-year prison sentence after seven stays of execution. These stays were won chiefly (according to the film) through the confused, altruistic but determined efforts of his defence lawyers, Dave O'Sullivan and Helen Devaney, Christian minister Tom Dixon, and media scion Rupert Murdoch. Working with screenwriter Louis Nowra, Lahiff drew on three books about the case and on other historical material including an interview with O'Sullivan's daughter and contact with Rupert Max Stuart. This contact with Stuart led to the inclusion of a final scene (taken from a documentary film, *Broken English*, Ned Lander, 1993) which gives Stuart the last, inconclusive word in the film on the question of his guilt or innocence.²⁹ This scene ends the film, putting into doubt the screenplay's carefully constructed series of defence arguments, dramatised by Lahiff in the courtroom scenes as a conflict over reliable evidence and historical truth.

For Lahiff, the film represents an important legal case that changed the judicial system in South Australia. It also represents a particular moment in race relations in 1950s Australia, as race intersected with class in the Anglocentric city of Adelaide, a moment which the film seeks to bring to historical consciousness. This approach to the historical film as a corrective to national history understands cinema as a public sphere which can

re-educate its audience by reconstructing and reinterpreting a significant traumatic event in the history of race relations. A crucial aspect of our understanding of backtracking in post-*Mabo* cinema is the way in which history, reconstructed as a courtroom melodrama in *Black and White*, speaks to the dilemmas of the present. In its depiction of flawed individuals committed to obtaining white justice for a black man in the 1950s, the film is firmly on the side of a 1990s politics of reconciliation. Yet its central courtroom drama, from which Ngoombujarra's character, Max Stuart, is largely excluded, reminds us that legal justice in the present is more important than historical empathy if reconciliation is to have any meaning. A sense of history as unfinished business pervades the film's ending, leaving the audience with an overriding sense of anticlimax, of hollow victory. This aura of pernicious, endemic failure, which surrounds all the white characters in the film, is relieved only by the documentary coda which allows Stuart to address us directly, not as a victim-survivor, nor as a 'real-life' witness to the events we have just seen dramatised, but as a kind of trickster or jester who, after all the effort of the film to clarify the facts of the case, leaves us with a bit of a riddle about evidence, truth and belief: Elvis really is dead. Isn't he?

Although the factual courtroom drama, based on the historical record, is the most prominent generic strand in *Black and White*, the film draws on several other genres, including costume melodrama, crime investigation, the modernist flashback, and even the road movie. This hybrid genre is more akin to Ngoombujarra's notion of history as epic storytelling. The mixing of genres produces a series of shifts between different emotional registers or affects. This incoherence of genre and affect has something to tell us about the limits of the historical film in communicating traumatic experience through a national cinema conceived as both a commercial-industrial and a cultural-interventionist public sphere. The incoherence of affect, together with the chronic sense of political, professional and personal failure in *Black and White*, have something to tell us about history, memory and storytelling in cinema after *Mabo*. The film's mix of the modernist flashback together with family melodrama and the crime thriller is a case in point.

In her description of 'trauma cinema' Janet Walker has described the problems that traumatic or catastrophic historical events present for memory and for the stylistic conventions of narrative film form:

Like traumatic memories that feature vivid bodily and visual sensation over 'verbal narrative and context', these films are characterised by non-linearity, fragmentation, nonsynchronous sound, repetition, rapid editing and strange angles. And they approach the past through an unusual admixture of emotional affect, metonymic symbolism and cinematic flashbacks.³⁰