“All we see and all we seem…” – Australian Cinema and National Landscape
by Nick Prescott

In this paper I will argue that Australian feature filmmakers’ uses and depictions of “the Australian landscape” have undergone a striking and important transformation since the 1970s, and that this transformation, while reflecting a developing and modulating sense of Australian cultural identity, has also been crucially linked with changes and developments in the Australian film industry itself, changes which relate to Government investment initiatives, increasingly complex production and co-production strategies, and, more recently, off-shore production undertaken in Australia by major Hollywood studios.

During the 1970s, following the confluence of numerous different factors, there was an extraordinary revival of Australian film. The graduation of the first group of students from the newly-created Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), was one factor in this revival; students like Gillian Armstrong and Phillip Noyce emerged from their studies and began to work in the industry, and settled alongside filmmakers like Fred Schepisi, Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir, who had entered the industry in other ways, and who began making significant feature films at the same time. The other factors that helped to usher in the revival of Australian cinema are also very significant for this paper: in 1970, Philip Adams and Barry Jones (working with the blessing of then Australian Prime Minister Gorton) travelled around the world researching Government-funded film industries, with the brief to prepare a detailed report recommending ways in which an Australian Film Industry might be literally “established”. After much wrangling and two changes of Prime Minister, the new Australian film industry was brought into being.
It is important to note here that the cinema was (and still is) a very young art form. Moving pictures had emerged as a technological possibility in the very late nineteenth century, and Hollywood and other large-scale film industries had only really come into their own by the early decades of the twentieth century. In this sense the emerging Australian filmmakers of the 1970s were working in a revitalised national industry that could only claim to be just over fifty years old, with significant gaps between fertile production periods. Given the 1970s revitalisation, for which we can largely thank Misters Adams and Jones, there was an extraordinary sense of the “new” about the Australian films of 1970s, which explains in part why this group of filmmakers and their works were dubbed “the Australian New Wave”. More about this later.

Because much of my argument in this paper refers to industrial change and the ways in which such change is reflected in the film texts to come out of the Australian film industry, I will give some context for the emergence of the 1970s filmmakers. By 1975, following the research and detailed proposals offered by Adams and Jones, the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC) had been founded, the South Australian Film Corporation had been established, the AFTRS had its first intake and the Australian Film Commission had been brought into being. All of these industrial bodies and educational organizations had one purpose: to bring into being a viable, internationally recognisable, and hopefully profitable Australian Film industry. To the great pride of everyone involved, this was achieved.1

Finding, thus, by the mid-seventies, that they were able to access funding for feature film projects and participate in a reinvigorated industry, the aforementioned group of emerging filmmakers came to define, through their feature films of the

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1 For a concise description of the process of revitalisation and industry-rebuilding, see David Stratton, *The Last New Wave* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980), pp. xv-xix, 1-20.
period, a cinematic movement that was quickly dubbed the “Australian New Wave”. This movement, or group of films and filmmakers, redefined Australian cinema on a world stage during the 1970s, and ushered in a new critical appraisal of Australian filmmaking. Crucial in all of this was the filmmakers’ uses of the Australian landscape.

Further contextualising detail is necessary at this point as well. When film scholars use the term “New Wave”, they are nearly always referring to the *Nouvelle Vague*, the French New Wave, that group of young French critics-turned-filmmakers who emerged and made an extraordinary impact on world cinema in the late 1950s. The *Nouvelle Vague*, with its groundbreaking approach to narrative structure, its often guerrilla-style shooting methods, its abandonment of classical continuity devices and, crucially, its unusual approach to cinematography and location work, comprised a group of young directors who went out and made films no matter what restrictions, budgetary or otherwise, they were forced to deal with. Jean-Luc Godard, still the most widely written-about and arguably the most important and influential of the *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers, famously shot his classic 1959 film *A Bout de Souffle* (*Breathless*) on the streets and in the apartments of Paris, mostly using natural light and often shooting mobile-shot sequences by pushing his cameraman, Raoul Coutard, around the streets in a wheelchair.

The approach that Godard (and some of his contemporaries like François Truffaut) took to location work and to the construction of their films’ images is of importance when considering the Australian movement that was to follow theirs. Many of the *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers were highly political, and made filmic texts whose narratives demonstrated great socio-political awareness, yet much of the critical attention that has over the years been lavished upon the movement has been
focussed upon the films’ formal characteristics. For scholars, *Nouvelle Vague* elements such as mobile framing, the use of available light and existing locations, sophisticated manipulations of colour and black & white filmstocks, unconventional editing, and so on, have been of central importance when describing the idiosyncrasies (not to mention the enduring importance) of the movement. All of these formal characteristics clearly relate to the construction of the cinematic image, and much of what the *Nouvelle Vague* filmmakers did with these elements concerned the depiction of landscape and locale.

*Breathless*, for example, is still spoken of as a kind of visual encapsulation of a particular cultural moment. Still frequently screened in film societies, on world-cinema broadcasters like SBS, and in revival houses around the world, the film often gathers an audience because of the extraordinary sheen of 1950s “cool” with which it endows Paris. Godard’s film gives a kind of gauzy bebop beauty to its shots of the characters and their city, and as such it is held up as a romantic time-capsule of sorts, a visual ode to fifties Paris.

Calling the Australian film movement of the 1970s the Australian New Wave thus invokes many crucial elements of the French directors’ style: the fact that the *Nouvelle Vague* was an emerging group of young filmmakers eager to make their mark upon a fresh (i.e. post-WWII) film industry was one similarity; their idiosyncratic and highly creative approach to the construction of visuals, with its heavy use of pre-existing locations for settings and iconographic visual constructions was another. When we think of the most memorable, icon-reinforcing (even icon-creating) Australian films of the 1970s, I argue that we are thinking of films whose uses of Australian landscapes and environments were crucially imbued with the same kind of “let’s just get out there and make a film” ethos that described the *Nouvelle*
Vague; further, the notion of distilling complex cultural sentiments concerning a landscape and a physical environment (in the way Godard did) has quite directly correlations with the quintessentially “Australian” images and moods with which many of the Australian New Wave films are filled. The images that are central to the most important Australian films of the 1970s are predominantly images of a natural landscape, be it presented as a romanticised Drysdale-esque vision splendid, as a terrifying realm of the impenetrable or the unknowable, or as a kind of border, a location where antinomic struggles between civilisation and wilderness are played out.

For the Australian New Wave filmmakers, budgetary restrictions, and their impact upon filmmaking practise were significant. As Tom O’Regan has pointed out in his “A Medium-Sized English-Language Cinema”, for numerous reasons, Australia’s film industry is a comparatively small one.² Medium-sized it may be in comparison with, say, the British film industry; but when viewed alongside Hollywood’s monolithic studios and financial structures, the Australian film industry is very small indeed. Reduced size means a number of things for an industry whose objects of output are typically extremely expensive to produce: there will be less of them made for each production period, or they will simply be budgeted more restrictively, in order to cost less per unit to produce. Both of these measures have been at play in the Australian film industry since the 1970s; our country’s feature film output per year has been notably smaller per capita than has America’s, and our films’ budgets have been miniscule in comparison. The latter issue is the one that most affected the emerging filmmakers of the Australian New Wave, and it is the one that

most directly relates to the uses to which they would put the natural environment in their filmmaking.

Much of what was considered remarkable about the Australian New Wave was its filmmakers’ uses of the Australian natural landscape. In films like Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), Fred Schepisi’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), Gillian Armstrong’s *My Brilliant Career*, and Bruce Beresford’s *Breaker Morant* (both 1979), the natural environment featured prominently as a backdrop to narrative action and, in many cases, as a “character” or narrative presence of great importance. Crucial when considering Australian filmmakers’ uses of their country’s landscape is the fact that location shooting, while utilising the extant features of any environment, also typically reduces costs for filmmakers. Most obviously, when shooting on an extant outdoor location, fewer sets have to be built (often cutting budgetary outlay enormously) and lighting setups are often more restricted (sometimes making cinematography more technically challenging, but lessening the costs associated with lighting and setups). These potentially budget-reducing factors were very important for directors of the Australian New Wave. Working on “freshman” projects as they often were, and using what was in essence a newly created production infrastructure, the New Wave directors had to operate with very tight purse strings, and were without reliably established production facilities like those available to Hollywood filmmakers – facilities like purpose-built soundstages, extensive holdings of props and pre-built sets, and other elements of infrastructure like practised catering firms and developing and rushes-screening facilities.

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3 Australian cinematographer Russell Boyd has spoken eloquently about the demands of shooting with the often harsh Australian light. See Boyd, quoted in O’Regan, p. 208.
With regard to budgets, it is illuminating to compare the resources of the Australian New Wave to those of almost any other group of filmmakers, but most particularly Hollywood’s. Peter Weir’s 1973 feature début *The Cars That Ate Paris* had a total budget, with advertising included, of A$269,000, while *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, released two years later, was made for a total of A$443,000. Comparable Hollywood filmmakers at that same time were working with access to both studio structures and quantumly larger budgets. George Lucas, then very much a young film school graduate in his pre-*Star Wars* days, made his 1973 feature, *American Graffiti*, for the “minuscule” budget of US$775,000, roughly three times what Weir had to spend on *The Cars That Ate Paris*.4

For the young Australian filmmakers, with such modest finances at their disposal, and without large film-production studios or soundstages to access (resources that Hollywood filmmakers had been able to take advantage of in their country and industry since the 1920s), creative approaches to location shooting were often necessities. The fact that the natural environment in this country held such a vast repository of iconic, mythic substance was, in many ways, simply a fortunate thing that the filmmakers were able to incorporate into their making-the-best-of-it-in-a-new-industry approach. Yet it would be foolish to suggest that the images these filmmakers were able to produce were simply settled upon because there was nothing else around for them to point a camera at. It is not simply the creative use of limited resources that gave rise to the indelible visuals in these cinematic texts; it is the sophisticated incorporation of a striking natural landscape into visual and narrative texts that themselves contain an awareness of the mythic quality of landscape that makes the films of the Australian New Wave so important.

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Picnic at Hanging Rock, to cite the most important example, and the film from the Australian New Wave upon which I will focus in this part of the paper, is a film whose visual compositions, incorporating the almost constant pictorial and symbolic presence of the rugged natural environment (specifically the Hanging Rock of the title) could only have been enabled through extensive and cinematically sophisticated location shooting. Peter Weir, the young director whose first feature The Cars that Ate Paris had been so widely discussed with regard to its stylistic and genre influences, and for its imbuing of the country landscape with the kind of foreboding one might associate with “isolated house in the woods” Horror films, set out to make Picnic at Hanging Rock after reading Joan Lindsay’s infamous novel at a single sitting.\(^5\)

The resultant film was celebrated with regard to its visual treatment of the Australian “outback”, and was hailed as the most significant film to have been made

\(^5\) Weir’s passionate reaction to Lindsay’s novel has been recounted many times, but for a producer’s recollection of the inception and production of the film, see Patricia Lovell’s fascinating No Picnic – An Autobiography (Sydney: MacMillan, 1995), pp. 135-167.
in Australia for decades. Reviewing the film in October 1975, P. P. McGuinness wrote:

With *Picnic at Hanging Rock* the Australian film has truly entered into the field of open and equal international comparisons, needing no allowances for inexperience, nor special consideration for having been home produced. Directed by Peter Weir, it is a superb and beautiful film, virtually perfect in its balance and delicacy, handling its incidents with such skill and sensitivity as to leave one almost breathless.6

McGuinness summed up the feelings of many international reviewers and critics, who more or less unanimously regarded the film as both an extraordinarily significant Australian production and an international “art-house” film of great importance. What most characterised the discussion of the film, however, was a fascination with its visual constructions, a fascination with the ways in which Weir’s sophisticated use of *mise-en-scène* rendered the film both ravishing and menacing.7

The image below demonstrates the kind of composition with which Weir and cinematographer Russell Boyd have filled *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; the low-angle framing of the actresses – all dressed so immaculately as to look like women from a Monet painting who have suddenly wandered out of their frame and found themselves stranded in the harsh Australian wilderness – serves to imbue the landscape itself with an amplified sense of foreboding and power. *Picnic* represents what might be called an “intensified” use of the Australian landscape for films of the period; whereas Gillian Armstrong would present the bush as metaphor for the harsh, male-dominated environment against which her heroine was forced to define herself in *My Brilliant Career*, Weir and Boyd conjured up a sense of the landscape itself being almost

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7 *Mise-en-scène* translates as “placed within the scene”, and is a term that broadly refers to a film’s visual style.
literally carnivorous, consuming the fragile and impossibly beautiful girls in some ultimately unknowable way.

Weir and Boyd’s framing: the vulnerability of the girls enhanced by the looming rock.

This idiosyncratic use of the Australian landscape arguably served to render literal a lot of what had been going on under the surface of more familiar metaphorical treatments of the natural environment. In *The Cars that Ate Paris* Weir had inverted the typically romanticised notion of the quaint, isolated Australian country town by depicting its inhabitants as an unnerving group of scavengers living off hapless victims of road accidents. With *Picnic at Hanging Rock* the director took Lindsay’s novel and emphasised the narrative’s qualities of menace, foreboding and the sinister, by focussing on photographing the landscape in ways that accentuated its inscrutability and amplified its monolithic power.

These stylistic aspects were what many critics tried to articulate in their discussions of the film. McGuinness went on to write:

As his previous film, *The Cars that Ate Paris*, showed, Weir has a talent for conveying an atmosphere of the sinister; this now comes to full flower as a hot, languid summer afternoon...gradually deepens into mystery.
As the mysterious events unfold, a sense of some unnameable horror, some unlocatable threat develops also – the Hanging Rock looms over the action exuding a dark miasma which is only intensified by the brightness of the sunlight and the idyllic bush scenery.\(^8\)

I have chosen to use *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as a central example here because it is a film almost every scholar of Australian landscape will have seen or read about, and because its use of the Australian landscape is so central, so vibrantly important to the text and texture of the movie itself.

![Miranda and the rock co-existing in the frame in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.](image)

The other filmic elements Weir manipulates, such as slow-motion, carefully controlled dissolves, and striking superimpositions like the one comprising the image above, are essentially in service of the presentation of the landscape itself. Gheorghe Zamfir’s haunting pan-pipe soundtrack adds much in the way of mood, but in total the film is an Impressionist-tinged visual paean to the monumental, unknowable Australian outback. In many ways the film is “silent”; its images speak far more eloquently than its script does.

\(^8\) P.P. McGuinness, in Moran and O’Regan, eds., p. 188.
As the most visually memorable film to come out of the Australian New Wave, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* stands for much of what the 1970s Australian filmmakers were doing during that decade. Like Weir, Noyce, Armstrong, Beresford and Schepisi have all subsequently made their ways to Hollywood, and are working with the gargantuan financial and infrastructural resources with which the world’s largest movie-making studios can provide them. In their days of emergence, however, as gifted young soon-to-be-auteurs making their mark in the freshly-minted Australian film industry of the 1970s, they utilised the rugged characteristics of their country’s natural landscape to create powerfully imagistic film texts. Noyce used the changeability of the landscape to endow *Newsfront* (1978) with the sense of realism and travelogue that its story of newsreel photographers required; Armstrong would exploit a vivid rural background for *My Brilliant Career*, showing the complex demands made upon the rural industries by “the land” itself through her use of powerful rural settings.

In order not to appear utterly focussed upon a single film in characterising this use of landscape by the Australian new wave filmmakers, it is important to consider a handful of other key Australian films that came to sit logically alongside *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Fred Schepisi’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, based on Thomas Keneally’s important Australian novel, used locations in the Australian outback in similarly striking though far more traditional ways than Weir’s film. Schepisi and his cinematographer, Ian Baker, did vast amounts of location scouting during pre-production for *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, trying to find just the right locations for the film’s many bush-set sequences. Atypically for an Australian film of this period, the decision to shoot entirely on location actually ended up increasing expenses; unlike Weir, who shot in two major locations (Martindale Hall in South Australia and Hanging Rock in Victoria) and thus reduced costs considerably, Schepisi scouted vast...
complex, confronting narrative is played out amid the harsh beauty of the New South Welsh bushlands. In this film the landscape is again more than just setting or location; the complexities of the indigenous characters’ interactions with the white landholders are echoed in the complex interactions both cultural groups have with the natural environment. Jimmie’s ability to escape through the bush is contrasted with the white characters’ difficulties in “taming the land”, and ideas about symbiosis and coexistence are carefully orchestrated with regard to both characters and the landscapes they inhabit. Like Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith essays complex types of alienation and character identification through its visuals. In Schepisi’s film, and in others like it, ideas about Australian cultural identity, racism, education, History and urbanisation are all played out through a complex visual use of the natural landscape.

Transitions

Through this enduringly important period of Australian filmmaking in the 1970s, the sophisticated and polysemic use of the Australian landscape continued for a number of years, across other projects like Henri Safran’s Storm Boy (memorably shot at the Coorong in 1976) and Beresford’s Breaker Morant, (set in South Africa and shot around Burra). During this period Australian filmmakers’ uses of location photography demonstrated once again that they were able to turn their financial and infrastructural constraints into strengths. Writing about Beresford’s feature The Getting of Wisdom in the Canberra Times in 1977, for example, a critic wrote: “It looks beautiful. To say so about any Australian film nowadays borders on the superfluous…”10 Australian filmmakers had become known around the world for the aesthetically sophisticated visual sense they brought to their projects; the uses of the

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10 Donald McDougal, quoted in Stratton, p. 51.
natural landscape in the films of the Australian New Wave, whatever conditions or motivations those uses had grown out of, had become points of praise for reviewers. Australian cinema had developed a distinctive visual style and sense of landscape, and was renowned as one of the most visually ravishing cinemas in the world.

It is also clear that the extraordinary reputations of many of the Australian cinematographers who emerged at the time (people like Don McAlpine, Geoff Burton, John Seale, Russell Boyd and Dean Semler) are due in part to the fact that their abilities as technicians had been nurtured or shaped by the striking and challenging natural vistas they have had to photograph. Dean Semler has said that Australian directors of photography are the capable and adaptable technicians they are because they were not trained in studios to “sit around and train lights on cigarette packets” for advertising images; they instead travelled into remote areas where lighting conditions were harsh and infrastructures nonexistent.\(^\text{11}\)

Since the emergence of Australia’s great directors and cinematographers in the mid-late 1970s, conditions in the Australian film industry have been changing, and with that change one can also chart changes in Australian filmmakers’ uses of the landscape. With the first two Mad Max films (released in 1979 and 1981 respectively) overseas audiences’ perception of the Australian landscape was made to change violently. David Eggby’s and Dean Semler’s widescreen cinematography for those films was used to turn deserted highwayscapes into post-apocalyptic vistas of profound dread and alienation. The films became enormously successful in America in particular, and helped in many ways to usher in a new period of Australian filmmaking. In the Mad Max films the use of what were previously regarded as

\(^{11}\) Semler, interviewed by Richard Carleton on 60 Minutes, NWS 9, June 1992. During this fascinating career interview, Semler went on to explain that Kevin Costner had decided to hire him to shoot Dances with Wolves after seeing the visceral cinematographic style Semler had employed for Mad Max II. Semler explained that Costner had told him he “didn’t want a ‘daisy’ to shoot his picture.”
Hollywood genre trappings (of the thriller and the action film, for example), and the juxtaposition of this genre machinery with the eerie depiction of space on screen proved fascinating and influential. I argue that this kind of Australian film, combined with the subsequent changes to Australian film industry investment incentives in the 1980s, brought about a series of “transitional” Australian film texts in which the uses and depictions of the national landscape changed significantly, and heralded a move away from rural settings and period films to a different depiction of an Australian landscape, one dominated by urban and built environments and contemporary narratives and genres.

This change is immensely significant, and is of course explained by many different factors. One significant series of industrial changes that has helped transform this country’s feature film industry has been the series funding and tax-benefit schemes that have come and gone between the time of the Australian New Wave and today’s Australian film industry; investment incentives like the 10BA write-off laws of the 1980s, for example, brought a deluge of low and mid-budget Australian thrillers and horror films that are now largely regarded as embarrassing by-products of wealthy businessmen’s efforts to hide revenue from the taxman, yet the larger changes brought about by such new funding initiatives are still being wrought. With recent industry developments like the building of state-of-the-art film studios in Melbourne, Sydney and on the Gold Coast, and the rise of Australia’s world class digital special effects houses and post-production facilities, off-shore production has become far more common in Australia, and alongside the cinematic cross-pollenation this has brought about, our filmmakers now have access to facilities that have historically only existed in Los Angeles or New York.
Two Hands and the new century

In films like Gregor Jordan’s *Two Hands* (1999), Alan White’s *Risk* (2000) and Jonathan Teplitzky’s *Gettin’ Square* (2003) we have seen this large-scale change in the depiction of an Australian landscape reach a kind of end-point. We are seeing a significantly different dominant depiction of Australian landscapes in our cinema, as opposed to the dominant images of landscape that I have argued characterised our films of the 1970s. As the image above demonstrates, Australian filmmakers and cinematographers are still exercising a sophisticated sense of aesthetic discipline in composing their images (through control of light, careful use of colour, and exacting framing), but the subjects being photographed and the settings and locations utilised are distinctly different to those that characterised the New Wave directors’ film output.

Just as the Australian films of the 1970s were often début feature projects for their directors, *Two Hands* was the freshman offering from its young caller-of-the-shots, Gregor Jordan. Like his predecessors, Jordan also came up through the AFTRS, and made the move to feature production with assistance from the Government-funded Australian Film Commission and the Film Finance Corporation. *Two Hands,*
as a narrative, is a contemporary crime-thriller, and the film thus differs instantly from many of the New Wave features which were of course commonly period-set.

Shot in and around Sydney, Jordan’s film places its characters in an insistently urban landscape, and removes itself entirely from the tradition of Australian films in which the natural landscape is some kind of dominating visual or narrative presence. Like many other Australian features of recent years, Two Hands is a film that tries to enter into Hollywood’s globalised arena through the genre door. In some ways the Australian films of the 1970s were “boutique” art objects; they were films that could not have been made anywhere else in the world, and they were implicitly sold as such. By contrast, recent Australian films have in many ways tried to visually disguise themselves in order to function as entries in globally-recognised genre cycles: the thriller, the action film, the violent crime caper. This is not to suggest that these are films without merit, or that their directors and cinematographers are somehow traitorously disregarding their country’s natural endowments. It is an acknowledgement that the Australian film industry has changed significantly since the
1970s, and that with that change has come a change in the way landscape is used and presented.

The visual style Two Hands employs (very much like that employed by White’s and Teplitzky’s films) owes much to artists like Jeffrey Smart, whose brightly coloured, hyper-real, alienating depictions of built structures helped usher in a new kind of Australian visual art in the twentieth century. I believe the importance of Smart’s work cannot be underestimated here, because as a creator of images who followed a period of Australian art dominated in many ways by the heavy use of a natural landscape, Smart, through creating his iconoclastic works, defined himself against the romanticised, “classical” style that dominated the images of earlier generations of Australian painters. Again, this may or may not have been a conscious decision to abandon the past, but Smart does stand as an artist whose work helps to describe the kinds of environments in which many Australians now find themselves living and working, and with which many Australians are forced to deal emotionally.
When observing the similarities between Smart’s style and the images from Jordan’s film, I argue that we can see direct links between these generational “shifts in representations” in the visual and cinematic texts being made by our artists and filmmakers. Jordan’s characters live in complex urban environments, and, like Smart’s dwarfed human figures, the characters of *Two Hands* find their narrative struggles and their cultural conditions echoed in the inorganic structures around them.

*Heath in hell: the Kings Cross of Two Hands*

*Two Hands* represents much of what I believe the Australian film industry has become, and that representation is summed up through the film’s depiction of a contemporary Australian landscape. Australian films of the last decade have been far more commonly set and shot in large cities, and their aesthetic approach, while arguably as elegant and symbolically rich as that of the films of the Australian New Wave, has embraced built objects and populous urban settings rather than an outback or natural landscape. The rich mythologies of the Australian bush have been moved away from in order to consider instead the ways in which Australian characters interact within large city environments; landscape is dominantly presented as
cityscape, and narrative characteristics have changed in order to embrace the kinds of genres that lend themselves to an urban aesthetic.

Now that sophisticated film production infrastructures exist in this country, filmmakers can utilise studios, soundstages, overnight turnarounds for the developing of dailies, special effects houses and other facilities in order to make feature films with all of the resources that American filmmakers have enjoyed since the 1920s. Again, it must be noted that the change to predominantly urban settings for the narratives of recent Australian feature films though is explained by more than just this infrastructural maturity; clearly there are other elements at work as well, like the popularity of particular genres, the marketability of particular visual styles, the internationalisation of the cinema marketplace, and the desire to tell stories about what might be called the contemporary Australian experience.

Young Australian filmmaker Emma-Kate Croghan, speaking about her début project *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1997) explained that a new generation of Australian directors, having been raised in cities and fast-moving urban environments, spoke quickly, worked quickly, and were thus naturally moved to depict their characters’ social milieux as embracing all of those typically big-city phenomena.\(^\text{12}\) This may indeed be one of the reasons for the shift in setting and use of landscape, but as with *Two Hands*, many Australian directors seem to be endowing their city-set films with far more emotional and psychological subtext than might be hinted at by Croghan’s ideas about simply “filming what you know”. *Risk*, for example, utilises deliberately claustrophobic built environments in which to play out its updated *film noir*-ish narrative, and thus stands as an Australian film that could only operate in the ways it does by being shot entirely amid the towering metal, glass and concrete of a

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modern city. Just as deliberately urban is Jonathan Teplitzky’s *Gettin’ Square*, a film that was shot on the Gold Coast, and that utilises a visual approach directly inspired by Jeffrey Smart in order to tell its city crime-caper story. The confusion, alienation and emotional dislocation felt by many of the film’s characters is echoed in the soulless steel and plexiglass landscape that urban Queensland provided for the filmmakers.

By considering the changes in Australian filmmakers’ uses of Australian landscapes from the 1970s through to today, I argue that we can discern a complex interaction of funding and investment schemes, industrial infrastructures, and artistic trends, all working alongside a changing Australian landscape and population distribution. This complex change is being played out through the creation of cinematic texts that come in many ways to present Australia and its filmmakers to the rest of the world. The “modernisation” of the Australian film industry occurred in the early 1970s; the post-modernisation (and urbanisation) of that industry is occurring now. What this might mean for the future of filmmaking in this country is interesting to consider, and this is a question I, along with many other film scholars and members of the industry itself, am fascinated and not a little worried by. The other issue to which this change crucially relates is the way in which Australians see themselves in relation to “an Australian landscape”, and how this self-perception is voiced cinematically. Are the stories being told by today’s Australian filmmakers indicative of a larger cultural movement away from the bush as a defining space and series of symbols? If so, do we risk losing a visual connection with our natural landscape, and is this important? Perhaps the next wave of Australian films might directly ponder these very questions.

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IMAGE SOURCES


The frames from *Two Hands* (dir. Gregor Jordan, Meridian Films, 1999) are from the Magna-Pacific DVD release.

The frames from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (dir. Peter Weir, Picnic Films, 1975) are from the Pathe UK DVD release.