Cultural Studies
and Cultural Identity:
Reconstructing Australia
Through Its Narratives

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that carry significance in terms not only of organizing experience in narrative but also in that "such meanings are ultimately political." This is Turner's starting point for considering myths concerning "Australianness" and why he wants to show them to be, as the title suggests, "national fictions," constructs which mask contradictions and recuperate oppositions.

Turner concentrates on films of the seventies revival, as he calls it, but references and texts stretch from nineteenth-century literature and films of the 1920s. The range of texts both literary and filmic is extensive, but the relative slowness of the book (150 pages including bibliography) prohibits sustained analysis of texts as well as restricting him to perfunctory treatment of theoretical points. Turner says as much, that this is a book of theory with examples, not a "comprehensive survey of the full range of possible applications." What emerges is a strong cultural pattern identified as "Australianness," the cultural terrain he wants to establish as "the dominant field of meaning." But the rather schematic character of this dominant pattern cannot help but produce an effect of flatness, or sameness, not only in the narrativities he considers, but also in the conception of how ideology operates.

The necessity of treating only certain texts in depth causes those he mentions to lose their specificity. For example, a novel from the 1870s, For the Term of His Natural Life, is compared with SF, a film made in 1980, to illustrate how the theme of "conviction," and that of prisoner mentality, function in Australian narrative and ideology. The similarities of narrative patterns he traces become variations on a same theme: the ideology of making helplessness and resignation acceptable and "natural" to the individual in Australian society. Thus he moves outside the immediate narrative context of the "prisoner," including The Gang of Inmate Blacksmiths (1978) and In Search of Anna (1979). The discussion slips into an analysis of metaphoric imprisonment including such films as Cuddie (1917) and Wolfe in Pigtal (1971), or novels such as Brian Penston's Longhorns (1954) and Henry Handel Richardson's Ultima Thule (1929). Suddenly the narrative patterns look exactly like the ideological patterns. One almost unavoidable outcome of such analyses is that, though Turner wants to stress that the values of the dominant culture are articulated through various cultural practices, it sometimes looks as though these ideological values precede the narrative forms.

The social significance invariably turns out to be that these patterns are inescapable ideological forms into which individuals are inscribed, "controlling fictions" into which they are naturalized. Turner notes this danger, that "the concentration in this study on dominant patterns inevitably leads to potentially monistic conclusions," tending to funnel all aspects being considered into a single pattern. Moreover, his methodology constrains the possible oppositional responses to this all-inclusive ideology to no more than an interpretive opposition, usually expressed through irony.

Turner points out that these dominant interpretations, hegemonic and sustaining for the status quo, can remain dominant only through a constant process of "winning out" over more marginal discourses, so that meaning itself is a site of struggle between conflicting interests and constructions. In other words, a dominant interpretation is the result of ideological struggle and a product of ongoing social conflict. Nonetheless, Turner's argument tends to make antagonism static, obviating the necessary interaction between the (antagonistic) interests of social groups. Given Turner's premise that narrative is "natural in ideology," to quote Althusser, that there is no "outside" to ideology, then the only possible manifestation of opposition is at the level of interpretation, where the narrative forms "leak" (subversive) meanings that seep out beyond what the forms are supposed to contain. In this type of reading the "dominant" is always "bad," reproducing hegemonic control, while the marginal is "good," inscribing the values of the unempowered.

On one level, Turner's example of The Man From Snowy River (1982), where "popular" (i.e., the masses') interpretations conflict with the dominant ones, does illustrate how nationalism, as one form of opposition, contains a possibility of oppositional discourse, capable of "challenging the dominant points of view of the culture," and working against the values of the dominant order. But even in saying that this sign of popular, perhaps proletarian opposition, that opposition remains structural (since there is no outside), a "contained" rather than a manifest alternative.

This weakness in his argument stems, in part, from his attempt to unite the positive aspects of literature and film under the rubric of cultural studies. For Turner, film embodies the values of popular culture in contrast to the high cultural value of literature, establishing a conflict which includes class values. Yet, while film stands in for popular culture, that does not mean that film also encompasses oppositional culture, as such. It is still part of the dominant discourse, and opposition as a real alternative or "outside" drops out. Gallipoli (1981) is not a very politically progressive film, Turner states, despite its use of a nationalist story. In Turner's model, texts which cannot tap into national myths drop out of consideration, and those texts that do are co-opted by their ability to be located within this dominant discourse. The inherited myths, the repeated forms, can all be accommodated; through this tradition must be read the current cultural practices. The result is that Turner preserves the continuity of a single pattern, or structure, but fulfills the prophecy of the monistic tendencies.

This makes the final chapter, "Complications and Conclusions," extremely interesting. Turner moves away from accounting only for the dominant patterns within the discourse of nation to consider other, potentially more subversive, forms, dividing the chapter in terms of realist and non-realistic practices. The question of narrativities becomes the question of representation itself. Here, Turner addresses some of those oppositional, popular voices which seem to offer possibilities of "Australian" identity beyond those laid out in the previous chapters, which basically had considered the products in the main, realist tradition. The strategies he considers to be clearly oppositional can be found in the works of contemporary Australian writers and film-makers: Catriona Mackenzie, Garth Gilmour, and Jonathan Droth among others. However, which lineation is the dominant one is often a matter of variation in the same film, as many "national" films are characterized by contradictory, sometimes within themselves, political positions. On the other hand, this "national" discourse is a very selective discourse, meaning it is not national, or Australian.

To pursue these matters not systematically would seem to follow the presuppositions of contemporary social and cultural theory. The representational dynamics, the hierarchies of power, the ideological manipulation, the social changes in the producing strategies (and the changing constituencies) of the film industry.
and filmmakers such as Patrick White, Peter Carey and Bert Deling (comparable to writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Gabriel García Márquez), who are characterised through their texts' foregrounding of "nat- iere, pastiche, and intertextual references," which, arguably, makes recuperation by the dominant culture more problematic and opens "Australia" itself into a more varied cultural terrain.

Turner emphasises technique and form much more in this chapter. However, while citing these texts as examples of potential oppositional discourses, the moment he re-introduces the mediation of nation, he cautions that "these examples present genuine challenges to the dominant structures I have described, but they are challenges which inevitably take place within the frame of those structures... The process of their analysis inevitably draws on the patterns I have outlined in earlier chapters." To use his own terms, outside of this "field of meaning," there is no meaning: there is no outside from which to objectively consider culture because cultural discourse establishes and fixes its field of meanings.

Turner never uses the concept of postmodernism (a "gobbledygook") and may not subscribe to it as such, but his goal seems to be comparable to what this concept supposedly enables: that is, an attempt to link formal innovations with a socio-historical context, in this case, nation. Fredric Jameson, whose work on narrative Turner refers to on several occasions, theorises precisely these strategies of fabulation and the like as characteristic of "narrative production" within late capitalism, a socio-economic formation whose logic of production demands different oppositional strategies in order for cultural products to convey their political point.

One of the significant signposts of postmodernism is, Jameson claims, the return to story-telling and away from a preoccupation with form, a strategy evident in third world literatures, within the stories of which allegories, national or otherwise, are enacted and formalised. In this way, analysis must also move away from a preoccupation with form to accommodate the dynamics of history and the possibility of social struggle. The last chapter is Turner's attempt to deal with just such a contemporary situation where previous chapters seem to treat culture, and meaning, as static. Earlier, this characteristic is noted in the pattern of late-seventies films to "in-voke" history, in films such as Caddie and Sunday Too Far Away (1975), as a means of providing narrative closure. In the final chapter, the self-conscious myth-making of Ray Lawrence's Bliss (1985) provides a good example of resistance to the conventional patterns of incorporation into mainstream culture, as are, in a different way, films such as Going Down (1983) and Goodbye Paradise (1982), to quote a few of Turner's examples, as well as the fantastical stories of Patrick White.

National Fictions is a strong structuralist rendering of narrative within the historical and ideological context of Australia. While Turner rejects the possibility of an "outside" to culture, he does allow for the introduction of an oppositional space within it, where the production of narrative itself is highlighted, thereby moving from simply following these narrative patterns to playing with them.

Turner's study provides an accurate portrait of Australian culture, revealing its recounting patterns, in order to create a framework within which connections can be made among the various academic disciplines. On this political level, that of academic studies, such a study is very useful (and perhaps necessary). But within this uniform cultural typology, the crucial question centres on whether this tributary approach (where everything feeds into one ideological stream) poses the question of ideology in a politically viable way. Turner's model shows clearly what "Australia" is in terms of cultural patterns and offers a direction for cultural studies to grapple more effectively with such a social construct.

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