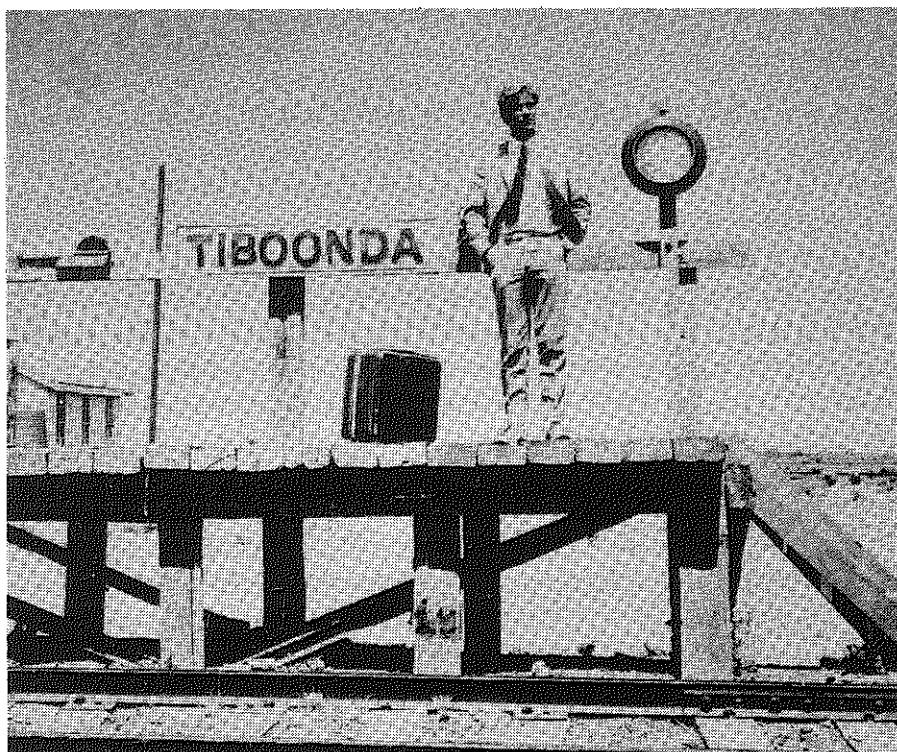


From *Wake in Fright* (1971)
by Ted Kotcheff



Cultural Studies and Cultural Identity:

Reconstructing Australia Through Its Narratives

Loris Mirella

**National Fictions:
Literature, Film and the Construction of
Australian Narrative**
by Graeme Turner
Sydney and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986,
156 pp.

There is a new kind of game being introduced into academic study, one that threatens the traditional disciplinary divisions that exist there. It's called cultural studies and its subversive potential lies in reorganising the texts and authors that make up a field of study — usually called the canon — in terms which do not respect the boundaries of an entrenched discipline like English. In the English departments of Canadian universities, one of these struggles has been to establish recognition for Canadian writers within the accepted canons. One way to affect change within a discipline like English is to expand the list of canonical authors until the ones you want included become canonical; another way is to destroy the divisions between disciplines which produced canons in the first place.

Cultural studies becomes a way to refig-

ure questions of "value" (literary, aesthetic, etc.) in terms which privilege the values one wishes to promote. In Canada, cultural studies programmes (or Canadian Studies) are the institutionalised means to promote an awareness and understanding of Canadian cultural productions.

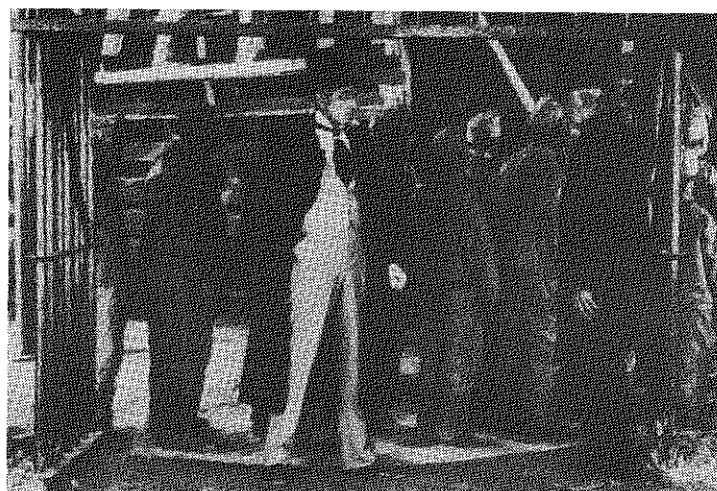
The problem is that all of a sudden "Canadian" becomes a problematic word: what exactly is "Canadian" about a given cultural product? Are these products "Canadian" in the same way? And what is "Canadian" anyway? Suddenly the trick is to establish "Canadian-ness" as a recognised entity at the same time as trying to construct this very property of "Canadian-ness" through these texts.

As Graeme Turner's *National Fictions* demonstrates, such difficulties do not belong to Canadian Studies alone. Turner attempts to stake a claim for Australian cultural studies, to cross literary studies with film studies, yet at the same time he wants to show that Australian literature and film are both "narratives produced by the culture." Turner's goal is to ultimately present the notion of "Australia" as the ideological product of the discernible themes and patterns within these narra-

tives; to show, in effect, that "Australian-ness" is itself a fiction or construct.

Turner admits to three basic objectives in writing this book. One is to legitimise film studies by including it within a larger rubric of narratological studies. The second is to draw out similarities among film narratives to construct what he refers to somewhat apologetically as a tradition. And the third, to find from these sets of patterns and narrative preferences the dominant forms of meaning which designate the cultural ideology of "Australian-ness."

The specificity of Australia as a social and cultural space allows Turner to ground his analysis on materialist premises, including the function of tradition, of the status of various academic departments, especially cultural studies, and of a particularised experience of the world. In this study, strongly influenced by Althusserian notions of structure, narrative is used "to suggest not only what an Australian narrative is, but also what it does," in that narrative works to transform history — social forces — into ideology, a naturalised social discourse. By "telling itself stories," a culture's narratives accrue determinate formal preferences, developing patterns



From *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927)

that carry significance in terms not only of organising 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 from films of the 1920s. The range of texts both literary and filmic is extensive, but the relative shortness of the book (156 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 "Australian," 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 narratives 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 *Stir*, a film made in 1980, to illustrate how the theme of "convictism," and that of prisoner mentality, function in Australian narrative and ideology. The similarities of narrative patterns he traces become variations on the 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 Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) and *In Search of Anna* (1979). The discussion slips into an analysis of metaphoric imprisonment including such films as *Caddie* (1976) and *Wake in Fright* (1971), or novels such as Brian Penton's *Landtakers* (1934) 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 those 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 naturalised. 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.

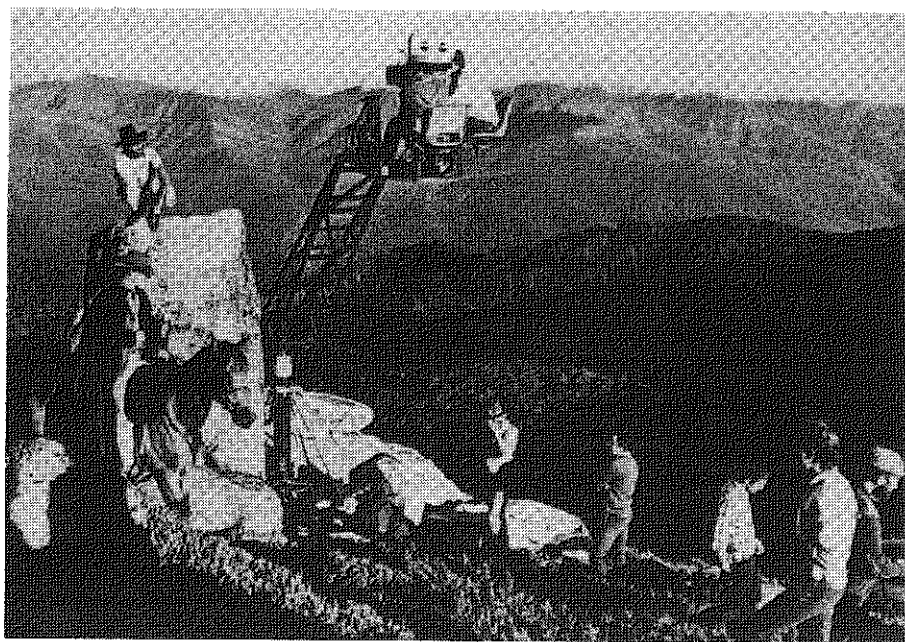
Turner points out that these dominant interpretations, hegemonic and sustaining for the status quo, can remain dominant only through a constant process of "winning out" over more marginal discourses, so that "meaning itself is a site of struggle between conflicting interests and constructions." In other 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 "bathed 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," representing 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 populism, 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 is a 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; film 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 the 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 fulfils 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-realist practices. The question of narrative practices 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



Filming *The Man from Snowy River* (1982) by George Miller



and filmmakers such as Patrick White, Peter Carey and Bert Deling (comparable to writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Gabriel Garcia Marquez), who are characterised through their texts' foregrounding of "satire, 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 potentially 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 post-modernism (a *p*-word of sorts), 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 content, 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 post-

modernism 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 "invoke" 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 recurring 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.

Loris Mirella is a graduate of the English department of Carleton University, currently doing research on the career of T.S. Eliot.

From *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978) by Fred Schepisi