

Review of *Migration Documentary Films in Post-war Australia* (2010) by Liangwen Kuo

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Liangwen Kuo's study of migration documentary films in post-war Australia is a meticulously researched and thoroughly detailed account of government film propaganda during a key period in the country's history. Although curiously unspecified in the title, the period under discussion in fact stretches from 1945 to 1975, when the influence of the Australian New Wave, along with a newly integrated federal film and television policy, saw government film production move away from documentaries promoting migration and towards films advocating integration and multiculturalism. This was indeed a dramatic shift, the previous three decades having been geared towards meeting the Australian government's post-war slogan: 'populate or perish'. Kuo has identified sixty-seven documentary films produced in this thirty year period, and this body of work is approached in a range of thoughtful ways in each of the book's seven chapters.

After a rather perfunctory account of debates regarding truth, representation and reality in the documentary, the Introduction clearly sets out the objectives of the research and its painstaking methods of analysis, before building on existing work to establish the context of Australian post-war migration films. Here, scholars of British documentary will find a fascinating account of John Grierson's influence on the Australian government's use of film and the establishment of the Australian National Film Board (ANFB) in 1945, prior to which the Australian state had made no serious effort to harness the propaganda power of documentary. While Grierson's travels in the US and his influence on Canadian film culture are more widely acknowledged – along with his services to Britain's imperial endeavours via the Empire Marketing Board – he also contributed to the colonisation of Australia and the establishment of a distinctly White Australian national identity.

Indeed, Kuo does well to situate the post-war migration films he discusses as part of an ideological project, identifying them as propaganda designed to construct a hegemonic national identity and attract a migrant labour force compliant with the ruling class. Under Grierson's influence, the ANFB kept a firm grip on the formal style of the films it produced and Kuo carefully aligns the technically competent, broadly expository approach it favoured with the ideological task of nation-building. However, although Kuo argues that Grierson's philosophy was adapted and developed in the Australian context, the combination of idealism and liberalism (Aitken, 1990) that underpinned his approach to documentary is hardly mentioned, leaving Kuo's claims in this regard a little thin. Furthermore, while the historical and theoretical context of Australian migration policies and the construction of its White national identity are explored in chapter one, little is made of their impact on Australia's indigenous communities. This is arguably justified later on, when Kuo finally points out, in a few pages near the end of the book, that Australian aboriginals 'were almost nonexistent in the migration documentary films made between 1945 and 1975' (p. 251). Given the book's focus on those films, the scarce discussion of their relationship to Australian aborigines is perhaps understandable. Nevertheless, given Kuo's thorough discussion of the construction of White Australian nationalism and its longstanding history of racist and xenophobic attitudes to immigrant populations, the almost total exclusion of aborigines – the principal victims of this genocidal ideology – from this discussion is unexpectedly unjustified.

That said, the discussion of the films themselves and their production, distribution and exhibition is impressively detailed. Chapter two explores these production mechanisms and dissemination channels in detail, analysing their instigation both domestically and overseas, and situating the films as part of a wider international media campaign to present Australia as a desirable environment for migrants: full of opportunities for work, housing, leisure and education. In chapter

three, Kuo establishes a more general content-analysis framework that then informs the in-depth exploration of the seven case-study films in chapters four, five and six. Dividing the collection of films into three broad genres, Kuo then identifies six narrative patterns and four content themes, before applying to the films Bill Nichols' (1991) four modes of documentary address: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive (no mention is made of Nichols' performative (1994) or poetic (2001) modes, although these were probably unnecessary in this context). The results of these readings are then represented in a variety of tables and charts. Though rather dry, such a schematic approach provides a useful foundation for the subsequent three chapters, which attempt to overcome the acknowledged limitations of empirical approaches with more qualitative, 'interpretive and meaningful' (p. 149) analysis. Here, meticulous attention to the visual iconography of the films and their use of sound, speech and music unpicks their whitewashed depiction of Australia and its association with modernity, liberty and freedom. The exception that proves the rule is *Wyalla* (1965), a documentary produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation about the factory town built in 1901 by the Broken Hill Propriety Company (BHP), a mining enterprise in South Australia. While Kuo's claims for it as a reflexive documentary are perhaps overstated, it is the only film discussed which adopted a perspective critical of the government's migration scheme, showing BHP's inadequate provision of amenities for its workers and its complete disregard for any form of democratic decision-making in the town it controlled. Kuo's discussion of this film is a fascinating one, and works as a powerful indicator of the real conditions of existence which so many other migration films served to obscure.

This book is therefore of value not only to those interested in post-war Australian migration films and the phenomenal migration project that transformed the continent from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. It is also a systematic account of the use of film as a propaganda tool to construct a hegemonic national identity, one in which 'social forces, historical conflicts and international power' were 'virtually invisible' (p. 245).

Bibliographical Notes

Aitken, I. (1990) *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*.

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