

Australian History at the Cinema

U3A Winter School 2019

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Presenter: Gordon Kidd

Introduction

- 1. Cinema is a good way to present historical themes to a national or regional audience. Filmmakers have been doing it since around 1900
- 2. Examples are the USA : Westward expansion, Indian wars, railways, rancher versus farmer conflicts. For European nations such as Britain, France and Germany, political evolution in the form of revolutions, class struggles and wars have been dominant
- 3. What have been Australia's main themes? The bush – fear of isolation, exploration, the Aborigines, and the consciousness of nationhood in war. City life has been less popular

Popular Themes in Australia

- 1. What have been the most popular themes for Australians? For a nation of coastal dwellers, the Bush has always been a source of fear. Whether of hostile indigenous tribes, the 'Lost child' story, the waterless desert or failed exploration
- 2. War and conflict with authority: goldminers versus colonial governments, soldiers resenting British leadership, bushranging have expressed resistance to imposed power
- 3. Urban disaffection has been hardly present in films. The cities have not been seedbeds of any revolutionary movements

Filmmaking in Australia

- 1. The Australian film industry can be divided into two main periods. The first lasted from the birth of cinema itself to the eve of the Second World War in 1939. The second began in the 1970s with the 'Renaissance' or 'New Wave' as it has been called
- 2. '*Soldiers of the Cross*' (1900) and '*The Story of the Kelly Gang*' (1906) began several decades of production. Historical themes were popular and the cinema boomed. Between 1906 and 1928, 150 narrative films were made. Unfortunately the small domestic market and the predatory practices of Hollywood squeezed out the local films



Filmmaking in Australia (ctd)

- 3. The 1930s were a lean time for the Australian film industry, though the '*Dad and Dave*' series were popular, as were other comedies starring George Wallace. As well, Errol Flynn starred in '*In the Wake of the Bounty*' in 1933
- 4. The Second World War stimulated film production. Charles Chauvel, the Queensland-born director, made '*Forty Thousand Horsemen*' in 1942 and '*Rats of Tobruk*' in 1944
- 5. While local filmmaking had succumbed to American domination, some directors had kept alive a local film culture for postwar Australian cinema

Transition to Revival

- 1. Australian film production of the 1940s had been largely for wartime support purposes. Damien Parer had won an Oscar for his Kokoda documentary. Chauvel had made *'Sons of Matthew'* in 1944
- 2. In the late '40s and '50s, British filmmakers, led by Ealing Studios, made films in Australia. *'The Overlanders'*, *'Eureka Stockade'* and others touched on historical themes.
- 3. Chauvel made the classic *'Jedda'* in 1955, in which Aboriginal actors were the centre of the love story. In 1957 a little-known film based on three short stories, *'Three in One'* was made but barely seen by audiences. One story was Henry Lawson's *'Joe Wilson's Mates'*, a story of union mateship. The second story was about the Depression, based on a Frank Hardy short story

External Contributions

- 1. Hollywood had dominated Australian film distribution from the 1920s, but also showed some interest in Australian social history, as had British film interests, making *'Walkabout'* and *'Wake in Fright'*
- 2. *'A Town like Alice'*, *'The Shiralee'*, *'Robbery Under Arms'*, *'the Summer of the Seventeenth Doll'*, and *'The Sundowners'*, were all made by overseas filmmakers between 1956 and 1960. Apart from Peter Finch and Chips Rafferty, the leading actors in these films were all American or British. The 1966 production of *'They're a Weird Mob'* was a hit that foreshadowed the revival of the 1970s

The 1970s Renaissance

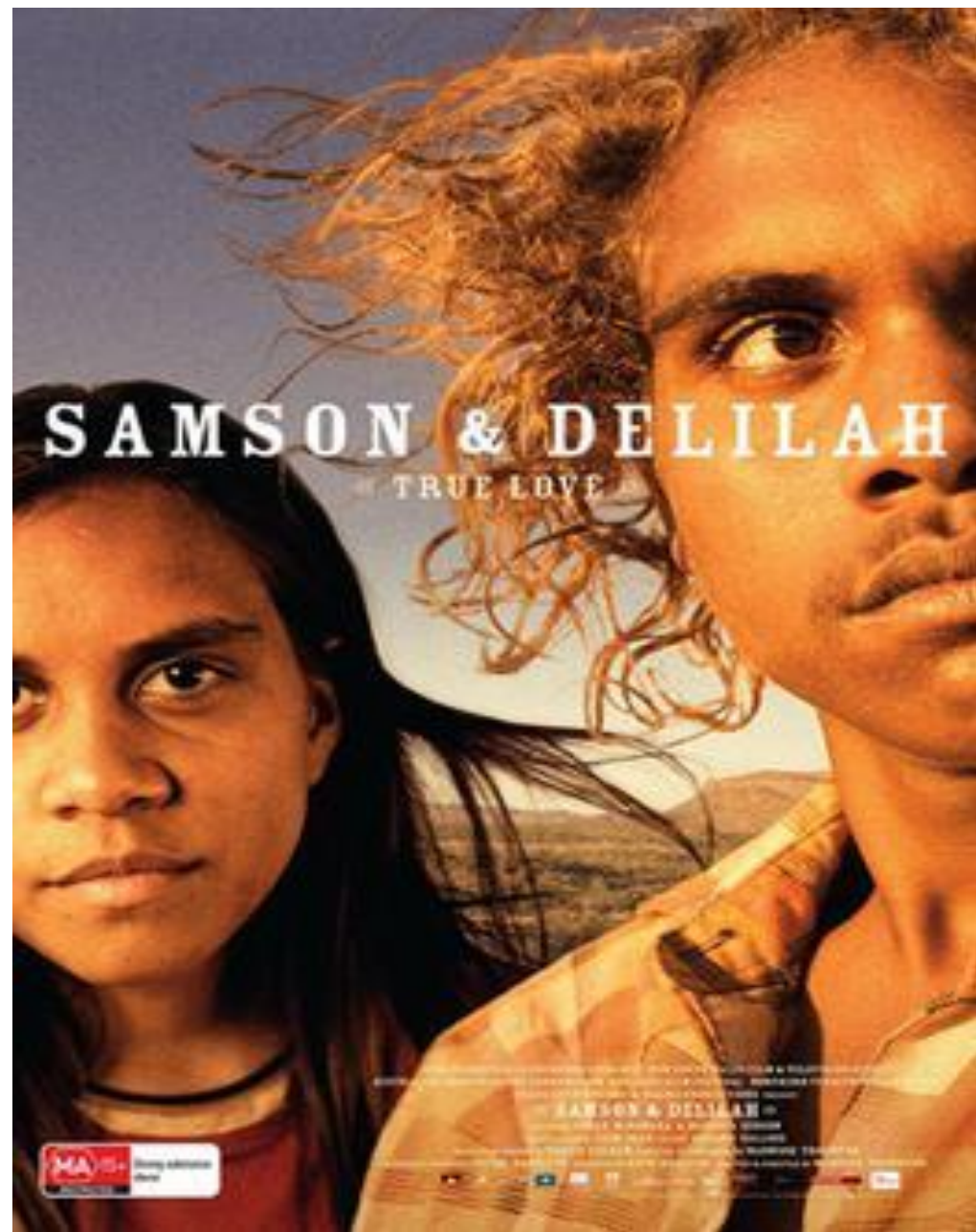
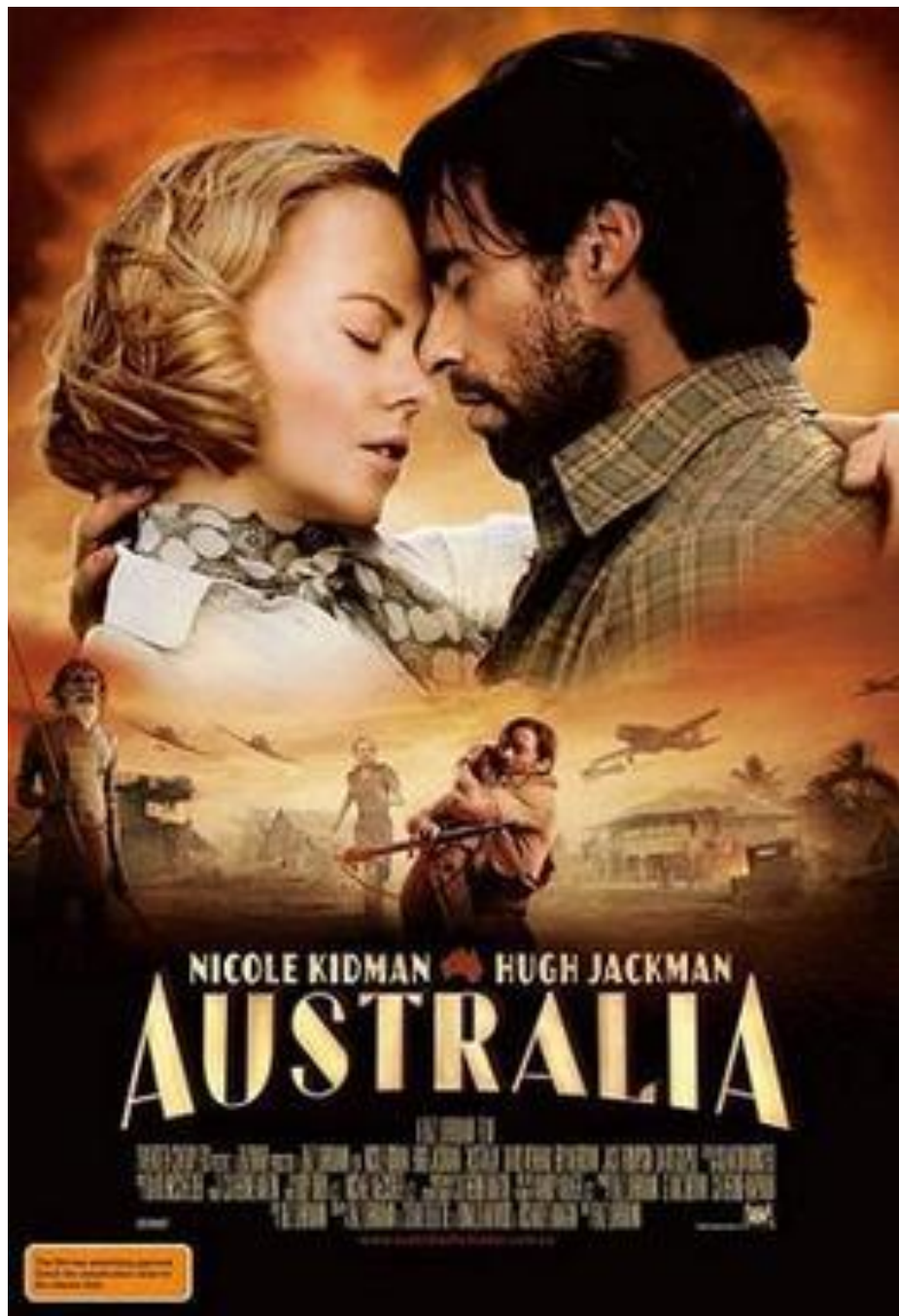
- 1. The second wave or revival of Australian cinema came in the 1970s. A new generation of directors seized the opportunities created by a renewed national consciousness, coinciding with the end of the Menzies era and Whitlam's 1972 election win
- 2. Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, Phillip Noyce, Ken Hannam, Gillian Armstrong and Donald Crombie all made films, mostly based on literary sources, that took audiences back in time to formative or interesting phases of Australian social history. Weir contributed one great war film, '*Gallipoli*' of 1981 and Beresford the equally moving '*Breaker Morant*' of 1980. Both films revisited a cynical view of British military leadership

Post- Revival Cinema

- 1. A short ' golden age ' was enjoyed by audiences during the '70s and into the '80s. The best directors moved to Hollywood to great success. A wave of cheap and tacky films, coined 'Ozploitation' movies, with themes of sex, horror and fantasy have gone into the dustbin of serious cinema history
- 2. However, quality Australian films moved on from historical themes to contemporary ones, sometimes with bleak stories that have not won large local audiences. Films like '*Shine*' (1996), '*Lantana*' (2001) and '*Animal Kingdom*' (2010) have won acclaim overseas

History Themes since 2000

- 1. Most Australian films in the last 20-30 years have not been reaching back into History. *'Muriel'* and *'Priscilla'* have given us delightful insights into unusual characters. *'The Castle'* gave us an iconic image of an unpretentious and loving Aussie family
- 2. But filmmakers still go back to History. Aboriginal themes have given us greater insights into past injustices. War films have taken lesser known aspects of wars. A series of films echoing a kind of American Western film language have taken us back to the Bush of past times. Immigration stories are emerging in local films



Conclusion

- 1. Filmmakers in every culture are drawn to make films about the past in their society. Feature films, as well as documentaries, can enlighten audiences about their own society
- 2. Australian cinema has from 1900 to now been a valuable cultural tool in identifying a national consciousness in a collection of colonies imposed on an ancient but dispersed culture
- 3. For a constantly evolving migrant society, cinema, as well as TV, may be the most important way in which an agreed consensus will be reached by the majority of the increasingly diverse multiracial Australian society

