Images of War in Australian Screen Drama

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Abstract
In common with many cultures, Australia has accorded warlike exploits privileged status among its national mythologies: military events in its history - as regrettable as the genocidal conflicts with its indigenous peoples - have a high and positive profile in the national consciousness. This is understandable in the light of the fact that the (relatively) young social democracy has been involved in five wars this century, for a total of over twenty years between 1900 and 1972: one indication of the significant part played by war in the experience of many Australians. However, the elevation of war to the mythic status it achieved entailed the interplay of more complex and subtle factors than such simple accounting suggests. The process begins with the institutionalisation of a natural if not entirely laudable pride in feats of arms (by ceremonial observance of the 'sacrifice' of the 'fallen', by the transformation of the 'facts' of military events into legend, etc.) and develops quickly to the point at which assertions of patriotism and national status are expressed frequently in terms of military prowess. Only international sporting achievements would seem to loom larger in their contribution to national self-image and self-esteem.1
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This being said, there is something special in the manner in which Australian military mythologies have been constructed, giving an indication of how and why they have become so deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. Most obviously, they have tapped and, indeed, appropriated several of the more favoured and potent myths (or ‘national fictions’)² by which the nascent nation sought to define and assert its sense of itself in the late colonial and immediate post-colonial periods. In this way, the overarching myth of the pioneer/bushman who had conquered a vast, harsh, hostile land was integrated with the legends built from actual instances of military prowess of an unconventional but effective kind. The image of the ‘bushman-become-soldier’ – tough, laconic, resourceful, independent and anti-authoritarian – generated the now conventional sign of the ‘Digger’ which provided then the standard iconography for the Australian version of the warrior mythology, which, in its turn, further elaborated the ‘Australian Legend’.³
It is, however, an interestingly paradoxical myth: on one hand it fitted well into the ‘ocker/macho’ mould of the dominant male mythologies of the culture in which physical prowess and skill were equated with status and even with moral worth and in which the exigencies of existence evinced cynical, iconoclastic and alienated attitudes. From this is derived the Australian version of the ‘code-hero’, which includes the Digger and Crocodile Dundee. On the other hand, juxtaposed with these elements in the character of this incorporating (or archetypal) figure is a certain sentimentality: it is evidenced in the emotional subscription to ‘mateship’, to a male camaraderie and an exclusive group loyalty based primarily on shared hardships and dangers, and to a patriotism that asserted both Australian nationalism and loyalty to the erstwhile colonial ‘mother country’. Further, the warrior code expressed in this mythology seems to share with certain other cultures (the Old Norse, the Japanese Bushido, etc.) a transcendental attitude to death in battle, one in which the term ‘supreme sacrifice’ not only takes on its usual quasi-religious overtones but is seen as an apotheosis for each warrior who dies an ‘honourable’ death: it is an heroic and a glorious act, to be enshrined in the national pantheon, and a rationale and an ameliorate for the suffering, the loss and sense of waste war brings.

The above brief account begs many questions but it provides a frame for the consideration of the ways in which the experiences of war by Australians have been presented in Australian screen drama, both the cinema and television. Broadly speaking, Australian screen product has tended to work in and with the mythic structures so far outlined in the treatment of war, reflecting, embodying and asserting the popular fictions upon which they draw. Very few have essayed the myths as problematics, accepting them as cultural ‘givens’ rather than engaging thoroughly in their critical interrogation. Note, for example, the acquiescence with the sexism inherent in the notion of mateship in virtually all Australian war films, while women – and positive presentations of female issues and values – are notable by their absence, exploitation or devaluation. Once again, the darker underside of the ‘Digger’ ethos, which has generated expressions of xenophobia, racial superiority and a reactionary social/political ideology, is largely ignored in the repertoire. Even so, one can cite a number of nationally popular and critically successful films and television programs that provide significant insights into war as a human experience and into Australians’ understanding of themselves and their relationship to world politics. At the same time, these works indicate, in their particular historical contexts, the prevailing social/cultural assumptions, and even neuroses. The themes that have emerged over the eighty or so years of the industry’s history range from assertions of Anglo/Australian patriotism, of national identity and of international
status as realised in and by warlike exploits, to reassessments that foreground the cost to the young nation of embroilment in foreign, mainly imperialistic wars, as well as pointing up the culpability of British – and lately American – strategists and politicians in the waste of Australian lives.⁶

The earliest of the oeuvre (setting aside for the moment Arthur Caldwell’s 1907 feature, *Eureka Stockade*) was Raymond Longford’s melodramatic propaganda *Australia Calls* (1913), posing the question: what if Asiatic hordes – the ‘yellow peril’ of popular (and persistent) prejudice – were to invade Australia? Crudely exploiting xenophobic patriotism its narrative techniques and special effects were, for its time, adventurous and apparently potent in audience terms. However, its main interest here is that not only did it deal with continuing Australian preoccupations (its vulnerable strategic position, its racism) but that the ingredients of narrative and character were to be repeated set-pieces – and sometimes stereotypes – in many later films about Australia at war. For example, the film presents the bush-bred hero figure, highlights the unique character of countryman-soldier ‘born in the saddle’ and connects self-image and moral standing with fighting ability and physical courage: that is, it launches, not only the embryonic ‘Anzacs’ but also the prototypical form in which the coalesced bush/war mythology is to operate.

Australia’s involvement in the Great War of 1914-18 led naturally and inevitably to a surge in the production of war films, with the Gallipoli landings of 1915 being, obviously, a favoured subject. The myth of ‘Anzac’ was born in the carnage and the film industry both reflected and promulgated it in films like Alfred Rolfe’s *The Hero of the Dardanelles*. Such was its efficacy that the infant industry was mobilised for the war effort, producing propaganda films that celebrated warlike exploits (eg. *How We Beat the Emden*, Rolfe, 1915) or sought to stimulate fear and loathing of ‘The Hun’. A recurring theme (echoing *Australia Calls*) was the infiltration of Australia by Germans as spies or invaders. (Cf. *If the Huns Come to Melbourne*, George Coates, 1916.) However, as the patriotic fervour of the early days of the war gave way to the realisation of its terrible human cost, the propaganda war on screen (as in other media) became more rabid, and the conscription controversy of 1916 and 1917 saw the cinema pressed into the service of the Government’s pro-conscription campaign. (Cf. *The Enemy Within*, Roland Stavely, 1917.) At the same time, such overt propagandizing was proving counter-productive, as war-weariness and the need for escapist entertainment led film makers in the direction of comedy and melodrama.

Despite the confirmation in the new media of newsreel and fiction film of the ‘Anzac’ hero, and the impact and import of the mystique of the Anzac and his legend in terms of national pride, national identity –
and the embodiment of all this in the notion that Australia had ‘come of age’ in international significance in the crucible of the war – this mythic ‘lode’ remained untouched by post-war film makers for a considerable time. In part, this was a reaction to the devastating consequences of the war for the nation, but it was also because its cinema had declined as a result of the dominance of the American industry and its stranglehold on exhibition in Australia. But two figures kept alive the ethos and image of the Digger: first, Pat Hanna in the 1930s, and then Chips Rafferty in the ‘40s and ‘50s.

Hanna’s case is interesting in the light of the ‘received’ version of the myth. He plays the character Chic Williams in a trilogy of films – *Diggers* (1931), *Diggers in Blighty* (1933), and *Waltzing Matilda* (1933) – in a way that exploits but transforms elements of the archetype of the Australian soldier to give an alternative view and an alternative image of the legendary heroic figure. Andrew Pike comments:

The first two films depicted Chic’s exploits in the army: trying to evade active service by malingering in the base hospital, attempting to steal rum from the army stores, and going on leave in England and encountering the social pretensions of the aristocracy. The third film, however, is set contemporaneously in the Depression, and almost in self-pity, depicts the hardships and loneliness of ex-diggers out of work in the cities, drifting into the country in search of labouring jobs, and growing too old to succeed in romance with younger women.7

This persona functions as a corrective to the icon of the Anzac: as ‘lag’, ‘con-man’ and ‘hard case’. He deals in expediency and sardonic humour as strategies for survival, exhibiting no conventional soldierly qualities; as a failure in a failed post-war world, he indicates a darker existential side to the figure. In his image, his attitudes and his action, he is a familiar Australian figure, the working-class anti-hero, alienated, a loser at the bottom of the pile who knows the irony of it all too well, but can still make a bitter joke about it.8

The character(s) portrayed by Chips Rafferty in Charles Chauvel’s *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940) and *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944) as well as in subsequent post-war ‘outback’ epics, owe much to the Hanna persona, but they are presented in a sanitised and more positive mode. As Andrew Pike says of *Forty Thousand Horsemen*:

Chauvel’s calculated myth-making saga of Anzac heroism cleaned up the digger image by matching the irreverence and mischievousness with loyalty to both mates and the national cause, and with a ferocious efficiency in battle ... Rafferty served a dual purpose of providing comic relief, and of showing the resilience and fighting spirit of an essentially lower-class Australian in the company of his more educated and better-bred mates in the army.9

Of course, the film had to perform the inevitable wartime patriotic and propagandistic functions: the heroics and the military triumphs had to
be foregrounded, and the national character had to be left unsullied by moral ambiguity or tendentious conduct. Nonetheless, it is not without its subtleties of observation of character and of social nuance and complex by-elements that prevent this tribute to a bellicose nationalistic mythology from becoming a two-dimensional action-adventure rendition of one of the nation’s favourite legends. Besides, the battle sequences – especially the (rightly) celebrated recreation of the famous charge of the Light Horse at Beersheba in 1917 – rank with the best of their time and by themselves are worth the price of admission. In any case, such is the temper of the work that the myth of ‘heroic failure’ beloved by Australian critics – and artists seems very much at arm’s length.

The Second World War – and Chauvel’s film-making – had taken a different direction by 1944 when The Rats of Tobruk was produced. In it he again celebrated a famous feat of Australian arms, another contribution to the Digger myth, showing that the new generation of Australian soldiers were worthy heirs to the Anzac legend. But the celebration is muted, the triumphs hollow and even the characteristic cocky humour is subdued. War is presented as grim, brutal and, ultimately unheroic, just as it had been in Damien Parer’s documentary, Kokoda Front Line (Academy Award Winner, 1942) and Movietone’s Jungle Patrol (1944). In the climactic scene of Chauvel’s film, the Australian protagonist and a Japanese soldier – no more than a youth – struggle savagely in hand to hand combat in the mud of the jungle of New Guinea, not for military honour or jingoistic national pride, nor yet to prevail over an ideological enemy, but to survive. One young man lives, another dies. There is no victory; and no apotheosis. This is what warfare boils down to. As the American General George S. Patton said: ‘No poor dumb bastard ever won a war by dying for his country – he won it by making the poor dumb bastard on the other side die for his country’. So Chauvel, who five years before had come close to glorifying war, can see by this time that in war there is no glory, no mythic pay-off worth the price.

American war movies of this period manifest much the same tendency, though almost always with more ambivalence. Even though the sophisticated industry in the U.S. was geared for propaganda as an instrument of national war policy and had developed a lot of product (from the late ’30s) directed to motivating anti-Nazi and anti-Japanese sentiments, the ‘war is hell’ theme came to be more frequently and forcefully expressed as the global conflict wore on and took its toll. Note, for example, the difference between Guadalcanal Diary (1943) and A Walk in the Sun (1945). Meanwhile, the British industry moved from ‘stiff upper lip’ responses to war, such as In Which We Serve (1942), to the bitter, ironic mode which can be found in an immediate post-war film like The Long, the Short and the Tall, (1951).
After its so-called 'renaissance' in the early '70s, the Australian film industry took some time to address the issue of war on any real scale, despite the U.S., British and (much more limited) Australian traditions and repertoire on which it could draw, despite the fact that it had been engaged in two major wars and an anti-insurgency campaign since World War Two and despite the persistence of the Anzac/Digger myth in the popular imagination. One of several reasons for this neglect, advanced by Jack Clancy, is that:

Australian cinema, like any other, is subject to the changing laws of trend and fashion, and the seventies were not the time for war films. The post-Vietnam period, with echoes of the peace movement, flower-power and 'make love not war' still in the air, saw the war-film go the way of the genre that was its companion in violence, the western.11

The article from which this quotation is taken is subtitled, interestingly, 'The Failure of Australian War Films Since 1970,' in which Clancy takes the view that the mythic structures – and the values and beliefs they encode – erected on the military events in Australia's history have been treated as cultural sacred cows and, as he says, 'have been subject to almost no serious examination'.12 The absence of critical scrutiny of these cultural elements is one of the paradoxical results of the resurgence of nationalism that was a feature of the late 1960s and the '70s. In asserting its cultural independence during this period, the country in general and the expressive arts in particular that voiced their attitudes tended to fall back on the certainties of identifiably Australian traditions. While this gave us the 'ocker' syndrome, exemplified by Paul Hogan and Sir Les Patterson, it also led to a confirmation of the favoured nationalistic warrior mythology as epitomised by the Anzac and the Digger.

Of the films considered by Clancy, two early and minor works, Between Wars (1974) and Break of Day (1976), attempt a corrective to this trend, presenting 'a clash between traditional militaristic attitudes and the nationalist, humanist ones which were seeking to combat them', and thereby 'raising questions about the Anzac tradition'.13 Of the three major examples he cites,

only one of them emerges with honour, and that a flawed honour, from the responsible undertaking of presenting war stories about Australians to Australian audiences. Two of them reinforce the dangerous myths that provide a supporting sub-structure for militarism, and none of them attempts the task of subverting or deglamorising those myths.14

The films in question are Breaker Morant (1980), Gallipoli (1981), and The Odd Angry Shot (1979), the first of which emerges 'with honour', albeit 'a flawed honour.' And this Boer War film certainly is packed with paradoxes, some of which are the basis of the ironies Clancy
considers the strongest positive feature of the powerful text,\textsuperscript{15} while others compromise its ideological integrity in terms of its stance in the presentation of militaristic mythologies. Despite the fact that the film stresses the paradox of Australian soldiers, after their nation's political independence, being employed by Britain as colonial mercenaries to put down an insurrection of other colonials (with whom they would have seemed to have had more in common than with the British),\textsuperscript{16} the audience, at the end, is left with a sense of injustice and offended nationalism at the trial of three and execution of two Australian soldiers by British military authorities for reasons (the text asserts) of political expediency.\textsuperscript{17} The sentiment generated is anti-British and anti-authority but not anti-imperialistic or anti-militaristic. Indeed, the audience is meant to admire the three prisoners when they join their captors to fight off a Boer commando raid and, as with its ready recourse to the archetypal image of the tough, irreverent, cynical 'larrikin' bush-soldier of the myth, the film rests without great unease, on certain assumptions that, from a humanistic point of view, one might characterize as reprehensible: to kill Boer guerillas is right and necessary; to use Boer women sexually is the natural privilege of the soldier; to deny by force the national aspirations of a people in the name of a third party – imperial Britain – is an accepted function of traditional loyalties. British military/political authorities can be morally wrong but this war – and war per se – is not questioned to any great extent. As Stephen Croft comments:

Instead of examining or even broaching such issues, ... \textit{Breaker Morant} in effect invites one to view its representations of the Boer War from the political-cultural standpoint of the imperialists ... Our heroes may bitterly resent their treatment by the British, but insofar as they accept war as a job and articulate no critique of the imperialism they are fighting and dying for, they \textit{endorse} the political-cultural values of the British.\textsuperscript{18}

In general terms these points apply also to Peter Weir's \textit{Gallipoli} for, despite instances which point up the pity, the horror and the cruel human cost of war, (and the perceived culpability of arrogant, inept British leadership for the profligate waste of Australian lives in this futile, disastrous campaign) the film embodies, asserts and, in the final analysis, celebrates the grand nationalistic myth of 'Anzac', reinforcing it positively in the consciousness of 1980's audiences. To be fair, the fact that it was an immense popular success in Australia (and elsewhere) suggests that its underlying sentiment and narrative/cinematic strategies were well-tuned to the psychic/emotional climate of the time, especially in Australia: the myth of 'heroic failure' would seem to have had renewed currency in 1981.\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, the portrayal of the process by which boys become soldiers is detailed and psychologically individualised even more successfully than in \textit{Forty
Thousand Horsemen (to which Gallipoli pays not a little homage), while the theme of 'the pity of war, the pity war distils' is more effectively realised than in The Rats of Tobruk, despite that film's admitted emotional impact. As a consequence, audiences come to know and to care about the major figures, to identify with them, to understand their motives for fighting in this distant, foreign land and to respond appropriately to the cathartic events portrayed.

By working almost exclusively in the familiar, traditional terms of the Digger/Anzac legend, the film tends, however, to take a conservative ideological stance, privileging the more positive elements and playing down the problematics. In this way, the telling (if obvious) irony of the 'Trojan Horse' episode and other more bitter negations of war are overshadowed by instances that reassert the status of this historical event as a nationalistic symbol. For example, the group of 'typical' young Australian men upon whom attention is focused, soon to be thrown into the holocaust of war, display the sense of adventure, of youthful exuberance along with a naive patriotism that is at once attractive and touching, as this spirit is expressed in images of sports and games, juxtaposed with those of warfare in a nationalistic paradigm in which the one informs and validates the other. Further, the ethos of 'mateship', linked here to the Damon and Pithias legend, thereby adding a sense of mythic profundity, is once more a central thematic, while the grandeur of the imagery locating the raw, untried antipodean troops on the sites of historic campaigns and legendary feats of arms elevates their warlike enterprise by reference to this epic mythic framework. The cultural resonances generated by these images are potent but, in being so, they add to the dignification of warfare, in historic terms, as a valid human enterprise. Finally, the fact and the manner of the death of Archy, the film's central tragic figure, leaves us with the conclusion: 'even if the war was dubious, the sacrifice was good', which raises, on one hand, the point of the significance of such sacrifices to the Australian sense of nationhood and, on the other, the issue of the achievement of an apotheosis by heroic death in battle.

At this point, I must confess to an ambivalent response to the film and to its sources in history and mythology. Rational humanism might indicate that this war (and war as a human enterprise) was a futile, tragic waste of young lives and the cause (arguably) of a social and spiritual dislocation that inhibited the cultural maturation of the young nation, but along with this attitude – and the anger it engenders – is a certain admiration for the courage and spirit manifested and a stirring of national pride. Is this why Anzac Day ceremonials and renditions of 'The Last Post' still tug at the heartstrings?

Nonetheless, the ideological propositions implicit in Gallipoli are extremely tenuous, even though audiences and most critics apparently subscribed to them at the time of its first release and even though they
are still being expressed. This and other films that define patriotism and nationalism in terms of military exploits in foreign wars tread a morally questionable, even reactionary, path. The primary proposition they enact, the ‘coming of age’ on the international scene by means of heroic feats of arms, can be countered by the assertion that Australia more emphatically declared its independent nationhood by its rejection of military conscription in the referenda of 1916 and 1917 rather than in the bloodsoaked trenches of the Middle East and France. *Gallipoli*, along with the television ‘mini-series’, *Anzacs* (1985) and the 1987 film, *The Lighthorsemen*, however, confirm the conventional wisdom, as if, to paraphrase James Wieland’s comment on *Anzacs*, nothing new had been said, written or shown since 1915, that the critical reassessment of the history and the myth had not taken place. And the set of beliefs embodied in these rehearsals of the persistent myth has had its impact on new generations of Australians. Commenting on his reasons for going ‘willingly’ to fight in Vietnam, Don Tate says:

I took with me ... comic-book images of Tobruk, the Somme, Gallipoli and the Kokoda Trail. The spirit of Anzac forged on a thousand battlefields. Honourable war. Noble and splendid ... An overwhelming spirit of patriotism.

Perhaps more disquieting, though, is the recurring theme in Australian screen drama in which the warrior achieves apotheosis, a transcendent heroic nobility, by the ‘sacrifice’ of his life. Since *Gallipoli*, it has emerged in a number of television treatments of war, notably *Anzacs*, *Sword of Honour*, *Vietnam* and, to an extent, *1915*, with some emphasis on its corollary, ‘only the worthy are worthy to die’. In reference to *Gallipoli*, Livio and Pat Dobrez comment:

The last scene of *Gallipoli* can come as no surprise. The entire film has prepared us for Archy’s apotheosis, which is his dying. Its aim is to elevate not an individual (like Frank), but the Hero, the Myth, the Smile. We all share in this mystique. Kill Frank and we kill one man, on one occasion. Kill Archy and we objectify Death itself, we evoke all the pathos of a death which is eternal. That last frozen shot of the movie is no aberration. *Gallipoli* really does glorify death, long before Archy actually dies.

While Jack Clancy notes that:

It is at first glance reasonable to argue that having Frank, the less idealistic, more sceptical character survive, while idealism, beauty and virtue are destroyed, is appropriate enough, since the Great War brutally dispelled naïvety, idealism and illusion, while it endorsed and reinforced scepticism. But it remains true that the glory, the glow of pride, even the national achievement, rest with Archy, because it is in the idea of noble, heroic sacrifice that so much of the meaning of the Anzac legend rests. ‘Archy shall not grow old, as Frank who is left grows old’.

In addition, Wieland states, in his ironic reading of *Anzacs*:
Men acquire moral stature through war, and heroism is equated with inner integrity. After the fashion of chivalric texts, war is uplifting ... Martin's death redeems 'Pudden', who dies heroically in both the book and the telescript. War had finally made a man of him! ... the war dead are heroic, immortal, immutable.\(^{30}\)

In this ideological context, manhood – and, by association, nationhood – are to be validated not only by the demonstration of unconventional but effective fighting qualities but also by making the 'supreme sacrifice', the ultimate consecration of an ethos and a mystique by the shed blood of those pure 'lambs' fit for ritual slaughter.

This quasi-mystical concept, enshrined in Western culture and its dominant religion, does come, however, under some limited critical scrutiny in a number of Australian screen dramas. In 1915, the principle is partially subverted by the image of the physically and mentally maimed 'survivor', who, at the end, stands as a metaphor for the real human consequences of war. Indeed, the myth itself is brought into question: there is loss, suffering, real alienation but no glory. Once again, in Anzacs, with the horror and futility of it all as background, the ambiguities of character, motivation and relationship and the instances of radical personal and social dislocation in the mini-series point up its potential for a telling critique of the traditional thesis. However, as Wieland points out, the myth is rehabilitated by the complacent conclusion, and the value of 'heroic sacrifice' is once more confirmed.\(^{31}\)

Of the three major treatments of the socially, politically and psychically traumatic Vietnam war, the mini-series, Sword of Honour (1986) purports to debate the issues of involvement in that ill-judged and ill-fated conflict, but it too ultimately succumbs to the emotional seductions of the nationalistic legend, even if with some residual bitterness. Vietnam (1987), a rival mini-series, strives to be more true to the unpalatable facts of that 'dirty' war even, unusually for programs sourced in Australia or the U.S., showing more of the Vietnamese people's side of the story (and more problematically) than any other screen treatment up to that time. Furthermore, the portrayal of the moral and psychological impact of the war on Australian combatants and their families and on Australian society at large, is presented with considerable impact, not the least because of its innovative interplay of the 'realia' of archival material (from film and television of the period) and fictional drama.\(^{32}\) The growing sense of alienation of soldiers, the social dislocation in Australia and the problems of healing the psychic wounds of the war are powerfully delineated. Metaphors range from news clips and dramatisations showing the burgeoning anti-war movement to the wrenching image of a bitter, paraplegic young ex-soldier, so traumatised that he goes into hiding from his family. When found, he says to them: 'Yes, it's me. Sort of'. But even in this
treatment, the Australian soldier is idealised, especially in comparison with the Americans whose reputation for the brutal treatment of Vietnamese civilians is graphically illustrated, while the essential decency of the Australians remains largely unsullied. Once again we emerge as unfortunate pawns in the global power game, with 'Cold War' politics substituted for British imperialism.

An earlier film, *The Odd Angry Shot* (1979), had dealt with the Vietnam experience in similar terms. It foregrounds the difficulties faced by Australian soldiers fighting and returning from an unpopular and unwinnable war and restates some of the easier terms of the Digger mythology—the mateship, the rough humour, the anti-authoritarian cynicism, the pragmatism and resourcefulness of the archetypal bush soldier, but with a brusque stoicism replacing heroism in the face of inevitable defeat. In its presentation of the horrors and the ironies of war it exhibits the potential for black comedy along the lines of *M.A.S.H.* and *Catch 22*, but the generic territory opened up is not exploited effectively: the comedy (broad and 'blokey') is played mainly for laughs rather than as ironic commentary and this, along with a less than confident handling of the 'war/action' generic elements, contributes to the sense of the lack of a thematic centre— and of a moral centre—to the film. Nevertheless, these very factors may render it a useful social document, illustrating the country's uneasy, uncertain processing of the Vietnam experience.  

According to some readings of *Breaker Morant*, that film may well be the most effective treatment of the Vietnam war. A number of commentators have drawn the fairly obvious analogy between the Vietnam and Boer Wars, with some American critics relating it directly to the notorious My Lai massacre and the Calley trial, while others have seen it as an allegory about the Indo-Chinese Wars per se. These interpretations are plausible, of course, but even though the correspondences are many and pertinent, it is perhaps best construed in terms of the post-colonial Australian ambivalence about a still-dominating Britain. The most useful analogue with the Vietnam experience may be the use (or abuse) of 'colonial' soldiers (the Australians) as mercenaries by the Imperial Power (the U.S.), employed to put down a rebellious subject people—the Vietnamese. Indeed, the recurring theme of British 'perfidy' has been readily transferred to fit the Americans in a more direct way. The acrimony directed to the former by screenwriter David Williamson in *Gallipoli* was redirected by him to the latter in *The Last Bastion*, in which the arrogant General MacArthur was substituted for arrogant British leaders.  

Notwithstanding this, *Breaker Morant* can be read as a parable of the modern insurgent or guerrilla war, an all too prevalent phenomenon of our time. As Harry Morant says: 'It's a new kind of war, George. A new war for a new century' and perhaps the ironies of this text may be
the appropriate response to war in our era.

Taking this into account, along with the many ugly images of war and its consequences in a number of Australian screen dramas, however, the tendency has been towards the privileging of the romantic and the transcendental (on primary or on sub-textual levels). This has led to an idealisation of 'heroic sacrifice' that engenders an emotionally lugubrious catharsis, quite at odds with the horrific realities of modern warfare. In this light, even the best of the oeuvre lose something by comparison with the great works in the repertoire that have similar subject matter and thematic/narrative trajectories. For example, set the mythology and sentiment of *Gallipoli* against the unromantic moral passion of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (the 1930, but especially the 1976 version) or the studied interrogation of warfare as 'rite-of-passage' in *The Red Badge of Courage* (both the 1951 and the 1974 versions). Then again, compare the admirable *Breaker Morant*, potent in its interplay of ironies, with *Paths of Glory* (1957) and *King and Country* (1964), both of which attack political/military injustice with a more controlled but pungent anger while also pointing up the destructive futility of war *per se*. And consider again *The Odd Angry Shot* in relation to its progenitors – *M.A.S.H.* (1970), *Catch 22* (1970) and even *The Virgin Soldiers* (1969) – in which the absurdity of militarism and of war are highlighted by savage comic irony.

These latter texts enforce a critical interrogation of instances of warfare and the militaristic ethos (and the attendant myths) from the 'rationalist-humanist' viewpoint: and they are texts that also, by analogy, refer to other repressive and inhumane institutions and regimes. Given these implicit criteria, the 'Great Australian War Movie' is yet to be made. Jack Clancy doubts if it will in the foreseeable future in the light of the inability of the Australian cinema 'to come satisfactorily to terms with the needs of the Australia of the 1980s'.

This may be so, but I am less pessimistic about the possibilities: while the mainstream cinema is customarily committed to 'tried-and-true' mythic formulae in this and other subject areas, television docu-drama producers and independent film makers have manifested more critical vision and inventiveness in the past and may be the hope for the future in this as they have been in other genres.

NOTES

1. It is perhaps worth noticing that the most generally and enthusiastically observed celebrations in Australia are for a horse race – The Melbourne Cup – and the commemoration of a military campaign Gallipoli, 1915-16, both of which are contenders as the defacto National Day. 'Australia Day' – January 26th, marking the first British settlement in 1788 – runs a poor third!

4. See Jeni Thornley, ‘Where the Boys Are,’ Filmnews, February 1981. Note that an anti-war film made by women – *Two Minutes Silence*, by the McDonogh sisters (1933) – was a ‘failure’, and no print now exists.
5. An indication was seen in D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Kangaroo* (1922) but it was 64 years before it was taken up by the screen industry. (See Tim Burstall, *Kangaroo*, 1986) Note also that television current affairs programs had treated some of the policies and practices of the R.S.L. (The Returned Servicemen’s League) that could be said to reflect something of these ‘darker’ attitudes, but this area of thematics has not been taken up in screen fiction texts.
6. This last thematic element has been a factor not only in its overt treatment in the ‘war films’ discussed later, but also in screen drama dealing with colonial rebellion – *Ben Hall, Ned Kelly, Against the Wind* and *Eureka* – and even is manifested allegorically in *Bodyline*, the treatment of a controversial series of cricket matches which became tantamount to open war between Australia and England.
8. One can refer to many manifestations of this figure in Australian literature, especially in the works of Lawson, Richardson and White, for examples.
10. The intercutting of the frenetic images of the charge was a virtuoso piece in terms of editing praxis of the time. *The Lighthorsemen* (1986) emulated rather than updated the treatment of this historical episode, but its revisitation of it, with its homage to Chauvel’s filmic methodology, is the best thing in an overlong and too often dull text.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Both the South African Boers and the Australians were European colonial peoples who had shared a tough pioneer spirit in alien and inhospitable lands – and consequently, they both had a growing tradition of rough, irregular ‘bush’ soldiery. Ironically, they also shared the dubious distinction of having invaded their lands, and displaced and subjected the indigenous peoples in each case. In *Breaker Morant*, the lack of attention to the African Black population is one of the most striking absences and silences.
17. The action was intended to placate Germany’s reaction and prevent its possible intervention and, by demonstrating even-handed justice to the Boers, help prepare the climate for peace-talks. However, the film stresses the irony that the Australian soldiers were not only the scapegoats of British policy but were victimised for the ruthless execution of their ascribed military mission.
18. Stephen Crofts, ‘*Breaker Morant* Rethought or Eighty Years On The Culture Still Cringes’, *Cinema Papers*, Issue 30 (December-January 1980-81). See also Shirley Walker’s article in this volume.
19. In Australia, as in most of the western world, 1981 was a time of economic recession bordering on depression. One can understand, in this context, the appeal to a dispirited and pessimistic people of this celebration of pure, unsullied heroism – especially tragic heroism.
20. The allusion is to Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’.
21. An actual wooden horse is wheeled in to a recruiting drive for the Light Horse Brigade at a country fair.
22. This is a feature of most Australian war films, and is perhaps the major element of *The Odd Angry Shot*.

23. The parallel is effectively— and blatantly— realised in the presentation of a game of Australian national football in the Egyptian desert (with the Pyramids as backdrop) just before the young men go into battle, as is the 'frame' symbol of the running race which expresses a spiritual striving both in athletics and in war.


25. James Wieland, 'The Romancing of Anzac', *Overland*, 105 (1986), p. 11. I would apply Wieland's comment also to the popular serial, *The Sullivans* (1975+), a 'soap-opera' treatment rather than a saga of 'a family at war'. Its recuperation of the values of an older, idealised Australia may be considered as a conservative intervention at a moment of social, cultural and political change and foment in Australian history.


27. The advent of the television mini-series as a common form of treatment of favoured subjects and themes in this most popular—and populist—of media, has made available these extended examinations of young Australians at war. Note that, as a result, there has been ten times as much screen time given to this topic since the screening of *1915* in 1983 than in the ten preceding years.


29. Ibid., p. 9.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., p. 11.


33. See comments on this film by Clancy, op. cit., pp. 6-7; Thornley, op. cit., p.10; and Susan Demody in *The New Australian Cinema*, op. cit., p. 95. For a detailed discussion of the Vietnam War see Helen Gilbert's article in this volume.

34. As in this case, most television mini-series dealing with war themes tend to adopt the documentary drama mode. It is appropriate to the historical source material, of course, and a staple of the medium, but by now it tends to be the conventional, even conservative approach.

35. Clancy. Ibid., p. 10.

36. For examples: the independent films *Every Day, Every Night* (1983) and *Bluey and Curley* (1986) both of which experiment with form and technique as well as challenging conventional apprehensions about their subject matter—respectively, the 'psychological casualties' of the Vietnam war, and the collision of popular mythology and reality in the archetypal digger's experience in World War Two; and the television docu-dramas *The Dunera Boys* and *Cowra Breakout* (both 1985) which examine critically two moments in Australian World War Two history; respectively, the treatment of Jewish refugees as enemy aliens, and the attempted mass escape of Japanese prisoners of war, in both of which Australian policies and conduct are presented in less than a favourable light.