

# More Than Just a Laugh: Assessing the Politics of Camp in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

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## Abstract

This chapter adopts a cultural studies approach to situate *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994) as a polysemic text that engages with prevailing attitudes toward race, gender and sexuality in Australian society during the 1990s. At the time of its release, some critics decried its negative depiction of gays, lesbians, immigrants and women. But, as this chapter argues, such criticisms either ignored or under appreciated the implications of the film's appeal to an ideologically loaded camp aesthetic. The chapter locates its approach within the larger context of cultural studies scholarship before proceeding to an examination of the camp aesthetic and its capacity to expose both the lack of inclusiveness in mainstream Australian society and the mutual antagonism among marginalised social groups. My analysis challenges the value of critical methodologies that revolve around arbitrary standards of positive and negative representation and reveals how such perceptions obscured aspects of *Priscilla* that can be seen to critique misogyny, homophobia and racism.

**Key Words:** *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Australian cinema, Australian humour, camp, queer, Stephan Elliott.

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## 1. Introduction

Since its release in 1994, Stephan Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* has attained the status of cult classic as a perennial favourite at film festivals and, more recently, as the inspiration for a stage musical.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it has attracted criticism for generating humour by appealing to homophobic, racist and sexist stereotypes. There is no doubt that the film constructs a hyper-reality populated by stereotypical characters that may offend some viewers. But as this essay argues, such representations can be seen to operate as part of a critical discourse that mobilises the camp sensibility to critique the bigotry and divisiveness within Australian society. In order to illuminate the critical potential of the film, I will examine and address the claims advanced by the film's detractors before proceeding to an evaluation of the function of camp more specifically. It is my contention that the jokes and stereotypes, whilst appearing to reinforce bigotry, can be seen to both expose the ways in which 'mainstream' society (organised around heterosexual, white, Anglo-Celtic settler culture)

marginalises ‘others’ and condemn the infighting that goes on among those marginalised groups. Finally, I show how the film can be seen to engage with the larger debates about racial, gender and sexual identity that were circulating in Australia during the early 1990s.

The film follows the journey of Tick/Mitzi (Hugo Weaving), Adam/Felicia (Guy Pearce) and Bernadette (Terence Stamp), three drag queens travelling from Sydney to Alice Springs in a caravan christened Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. The road trip is prompted by an invitation from Tick’s ex-wife, Marion (Sarah Chadwick), to perform at the hotel where she works. The trip also enables Tick to reconnect with his son. Felicia participates in order to fulfil a lifelong dream of climbing King’s Canyon in drag, while Bernadette, a transgendered female, agrees to come along to get over the death of her lover. Along the way, they experience joy and frustration, open-mindedness and discrimination. They also encounter a host of colourful characters including Shirl (June Marie Bennett), a butch dyke who verbally abuses the queens when they invade ‘her’ pub; Bob (Bill Hunter), a mechanic who works on Priscilla and befriends the queens; Cynthia (Julia Cortez), an opportunist from the Philippines, who tricks Bob into marrying her but leaves when she grows tired of him, and a group of Aborigines, who assist the queens when automotive difficulties threaten to leave them stranded in the Outback. Despite the queens’ failure to impress the shocked audience in Alice Springs, the blossoming romance between Bob and Bernadette, Felicia’s trek up King’s Canyon and Tick’s newfound bond with his son signify that the journey was more than a road trip, it was a life experience rooted in self-discovery and mutual understanding.

## 2. Film and Cultural Studies

This essay shares with other contributions to this collection a desire to make sense of the relationship between culture and ideology. If we understand culture as the ‘pattern of beliefs, acts, responses, and artefacts that we produce and comprehend everyday,’ it becomes clear that it is by no means a product of nature, but rather a social construct ‘made by people in history for conscious or even unconscious reasons, the product of all they think and do.’<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolker observes that,

We can understand why and how our entertainments affirm or deny our beliefs. We can see that none of this is natural; it is all born of class, gender, race, education, acculturation and ideologies that drive us all.<sup>3</sup>

Filmmakers are products of their society and they use their work to engage with the world around them. Sometimes they acknowledge their artistic and ideological intentions, but even when they either remain silent or actively

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deny having an ideological axe to grind, it is still important for readers/viewers to consider the work being done by any text circulating in society.

Critics like Theodoro Adorno and Max Horkheimer have ridiculed popular culture as a debasement of high culture and an outlet for promulgating destructive, consumerist ideologies amongst the masses.<sup>4</sup> In response, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson - the founding fathers of British cultural studies - stressed the power of individual creativity to shape culture.<sup>5</sup> These champions of popular culture analysed texts in relation to practices that, according to Andy Willis, were structured 'not only by the elite culture industry but by the activities and interventions of many subcultures, which are determined by class, race, and gender.'<sup>6</sup> This perspective 'acknowledge[s] the interests and aspirations of different classes and social groups within a given society at a specific historical movement [and] illustrate how these interests and aspirations were the product of struggles between them.'<sup>7</sup> It also situates films as products of 'the struggles between dominant and subordinate groups' rather than as hegemonic texts that impose dominant ideologies upon passive audiences.<sup>8</sup> The resistance threshold of individuals varies considerably, yet audiences have very definite viewing habits, moral preferences and value systems that filmmakers ignore at their peril. As such, Willis concludes that:

popular films have to address the interests and aspirations of their target audiences, even if a particular film may seek to contain those interests and aspirations within specific terms. As a result, popular films will always attempt to resolve contradictory ideologies, rather than simply to promote a specific ideological position.<sup>9</sup>

Tom O'Regan regards such 'social problematisation' as 'part of the cultural materials of the cinema alongside technology, genre, formats and audience preferences that film-makers need to work with.'<sup>10</sup> By positioning films as a site of conflict between competing ideas and ideologies, cultural studies highlights the importance of reading texts critically in order to better understand what is at stake in the representation and resolution of social problematisations in cinema.

Films may endorse or critique values and ideologies; they may send explicit messages or offer ambiguous meanings that require audiences to generate their own interpretations. What they do not do, however, is offer an objective *reflection* of society and it is important that we use language that captures in the most accurate way the relationship between texts and context. I propose an alternative phrasing that situates films as *engagements* with other discourses for this language invites critics to explore the manifold ways

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in which text and context interact. This is not just a case of quibbling over semantics because ‘reflect’ and ‘engage’ imply very different descriptions of film’s relationship to society. ‘Reflect’ connotes passivity and coincides with the structuralist view that culture exists as something predetermined and external to the film itself. By contrast, ‘engage’ acknowledges the capacity of films to endorse, critique or problematise aspects of culture at the same time that it recognises the film’s place within the very culture being scrutinised. An additional benefit of seeing films as engagements with, rather than reflections of, ideology is that it is consistent with the cultural studies perspective wherein texts exist as sites of ideological struggle, not as conduits of unambiguous, monolithic meanings. With that analytical framework in mind, I now turn to an exploration of the critical appraisals of *Priscilla*.

### 3. Reception and the Limits of ‘Positive Representation’ Analysis

Critics lambasted the film for failing to show representatives of socially marginalised groups in a positive light. Pamela Robertson attacked it for lacking insight into Aboriginal cultures and portraying them as existing solely to serve the needs of white characters.<sup>11</sup> Hilary Harris went even further, arguing that the film ‘consolidate[d] white prejudice against Indigenous peoples, as well as, importantly, white preference for themselves.’<sup>12</sup> Calling the film misogynistic, Emily Rustin blasted the negative portrayal of biological females and the mobilization of humour at the expense of women.<sup>13</sup> Cynthia was labelled a sexist and racist caricature that played into offensive stereotypes of Asian women as mail-order brides and sex workers. Rustin condemned her depiction as an aggressive harpy whose frequent lapses into her native tongue and tacky femininity highlight her otherness. She was especially scathing of the sequence where Cynthia upstages the queens with an exotic dance routine that involves ejecting a ping-pong ball from her vagina. The performance, said Rustin, rendered Cynthia ‘a tawdry and pathetic rival who serves to confirm heterosexual norms.’<sup>14</sup> Melba Margison of the Centre for Filipino Concerns also expressed alarm at the representation of Filipino identity and its potential real-world consequences.

[T]he way we have been treated [in the film] is actually killing us. For us, it is the murder of the dignity of Filipino women. It will encourage more violence against us [...] all the main and secondary characters in the film were treated with respect, humanized and dignified, the Filipina was treated with condemnation, dehumanised and stripped of any form of dignity.<sup>15</sup>

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Producer Al Clark denied that the film was making a statement about anyone and defended it as a 'gentle satire' whose 'enormous affection for its characters' did not preclude depicting them as a collection of social misfits.<sup>16</sup> Chris Berry rebuffed the notion that the film was harmless fun and charged it with employing a destructive 'divide-and-rule model' that indulged white, gay men at the expense of women, immigrants and other minorities.<sup>17</sup> By focusing on the negative, stereotypical portrayal of certain characters, critics were able to substantiate the claim that the film was racist and sexist.

Although Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual communities were the film's most strident supporters, the portrayal of queer characters was denounced by some as homophobic.<sup>18</sup> Organisers of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras refused to have anything to do with what they saw as a 'racist, sexist and homophobic narrative.'<sup>19</sup> Writing in *Brother/Sister*, a Melbourne-based gay community newspaper, Andrew Mast slammed the clichéd treatment of drag queens.

Writer Stephan Elliot presents a very limited, old-fashioned and unconvincing depiction of a drag show trio on the road in the Australian outback. The clichés of smiles and make-up hiding sad and tragic lives are rolled out, in this case read it as, 'no queen can be truly happy' [...] a group of queens for all the world to laugh at [...] look down upon and even despise with very few positive aspects for audiences to see.<sup>20</sup>

Raymond Murray disparaged the film's 'play it safe' approach to representing sex and physical intimacy between men. He described the film as:

mindless determinedly inoffensive feel-good fun for the audience, an enjoyable romp that is less a milestone advancement for gays in film and more like a 90s version of *La Cage aux Folles*. The more radical queer viewers might have seen the film as another example of fag caricatures - little more than a gay minstrel show.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, Marcus Breen accused the film of 'playing along with antiseptic myths about the delights of the gay lifestyle' whilst 'paper[ing] over the difficulties of homosexuality' and 'literally dressing up the complexity of sexual politics in the 1990s, while boldly presenting the transvestite/transsexual life as normal.'<sup>22</sup>

What is particularly noteworthy about this sample of appraisals is that collectively they refute the allegation that some characters were singled

out for ridicule while others were exempted from it. In fact, where it comes to vulgar humour and stereotypical representations, the film is an equal opportunity offender. Rather than presume that the depiction of stereotypes connotes endorsement or that films can only engage meaningfully with identity issues by resorting to positive images, I propose an approach that reads aspects of characterisation, narrative and theme vis-à-vis the context of the film as a whole. This strategy can shed light on whether offensive stereotypes are being invoked in a self-referential and ultimately *critical* way, as a means of provocation designed to jar audiences from their passivity, or whether they are indeed operating in the service of intolerance. Applying this methodology to *Priscilla*, it becomes apparent that reviewers have employed selective readings to arrive at the conclusion that the film is racist, sexist and homophobic.

While none of this analysis is intended to deny the legitimacy of a viewer's right to take offence at what they see on screen, it is equally important to question the extent to which claims about negative representations are actually a function of the critic's own worldview rather than an index of the film's ideological stance. In Rustin's discussion of Cynthia, for example, it is the critic herself who labels the character tawdry, aggressive and tacky, not the film - which can actually be seen to highlight her strength and superiority in terms of femininity and performative prowess. Consider the context in which the ping-pong ball routine is presented: Cynthia takes the stage after the drag queens fail to impress the men in the audience and the approval she elicits prompts the queens to concede her advantage over them. John Champagne points out that:

Felicia expresses not disgust, but a kind of admiration during the ping-pong number, s/he apparently reads Cynthia's act as a kind of wicked parody of a strip tease that renders the men in the audience all too freakish in their delight. Even Bernadette expresses a grudging if admiration of Cynthia. Comparing her own act to Cynthia's, she laments, 'I'm just a gifted amateur around here.'<sup>23</sup>

Cynthia may come across as a gold-digger who lured her husband into marriage so that she could live in Australia, but she is portrayed as a woman who gets what she wants by refusing to be dominated by anyone. Bob may try to exert a paternalistic influence by locking the alcohol away to prevent her from getting drunk, but she holds her own in conversation (as evidenced by her so-called aggression), she beats the queens at their own game and ultimately leaves Bob when she decides she has had enough of bush town life. This is hardly the behaviour of a woman who is exploited and oppressed by her husband. None of this is to deny that women who earn a living as

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exotic dancers or sex workers are often victimised and exploited in the real world, and there is no evidence to suggest that the film is trying to make light of that exploitation. Rather, I think it's simply another mode of sexual performance that challenges the heteronormative order.

What Cynthia does with the ping-pong ball is shocking, yet it can also be seen to serve a legitimate purpose in the context of the film. She could have done anything on that stage, but her performance of what could be described as a birth parody is significant in light of the film's overarching preoccupation with the body as both a biological and cultural product. This ersatz birth scene offers a subtle parallel to the actual birth of Tick's son as depicted in flashback. The irony here is that while the lesbian and the gay man produce a child, the only thing being delivered by the heterosexual woman is a bit of sporting equipment. For this reason, I question Rustin's suggestion that the routine confirms heterosexual norms because although it does evoke what could be an exploitive scenario that objectifies the female body, it can equally be seen to undermine the procreative impulse and notions of female sexual passivity that inform the heteronormative order. The queerness of Cynthia's identity may escape the notice of many viewers, but her act is quite at odds with hetero-normative discourses that frame sex as a private act between a man and woman associated with procreation. As with the drag act, Cynthia's routine emphasises the pleasure and performance of sexuality in a public place. The respective performances may elicit different reactions and levels of moral objection from spectators, but they are both rooted in a queer aesthetic. The significance of Cynthia's performance is that it takes place after the queens have failed to excite the crowd, thus it can be seen as part of a competition in which she solidifies her own status by playing on the devaluation of the drag queens. Indeed, the pleasure that Cynthia appears to derive from her routine situates it as an expression of independence and sexual agency, not to mention a gesture that neither she nor the film seems to regard as tawdry or immoral. The film's refusal to impose any moral judgment on Cynthia's taste in entertainment is indicative, in my view, of a rather progressive stance on matters of sexuality and morality. At the same time, the fact that critics saw the performance as a negative representation reveals more about their own prejudices than about the film itself.

Selective readings of the text inform other claims about the misogynistic treatment of biological females as well. The exchange between the transgendered Bernadette and the lesbian-coded Shirl has been cited as a prime example of the film's denigration of women, but the implications of the pub sequence are more complex than critics have acknowledged. As the queens enter the scene, Shirl sneers,

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Well look what the cat dragged in, what have we got here,  
eh? A couple of showgirls. Where did you ladies come in  
from? Uranus? We've got nothing here for people like you.

Without missing a beat, Bernadette responds, 'Now listen here you mullet. Why don't you just light your tampon and blow your box apart, because that's the only bang you're ever going to get sweetheart.' For Rustin, the laughter that comes at the woman's expense allows the men, including the drag queens, to bond by 'affirming the humiliation of the local woman'.<sup>24</sup> There are several responses to be made here. The brutal nature of Australian humour (about which more will be said later) is predicated upon generating laughs at the expense of others, so this is by no means a sign of unique abuse of a female, lesbian character. Later in the film, when a heckler taunts Felicia with an invitation to 'show us your pink bits' the queen responds, 'No, I don't think I will. Now do you know why this microphone has such a long cord? So it's easily retrieved after I've shoved it up your arse.' In fact, such was the extensiveness of the violent and sexual rhetoric that Evan Williams' review in *Quadrant* criticised it for being 'burdened with gross sexual and scatological references'.<sup>25</sup> The fact that such language was used in connection with male and female characters alike does not mitigate the offensiveness it may have caused, but it does refute the suggestion that the rhetorical aggression was aimed uniquely at women and, therefore, proof of the film's misogyny.

If anything, the queens, Shirl and Cynthia are equally guilty of building themselves up by tearing down other queer characters. The fact that Shirl initiates the bitchy, scatological rhetoric further undermines the sense that she is a victim. There is even a level of parity to their exchange since 'Uranus' and 'box' refer to sites of penetration on the male and female body respectively. While Bernadette's language is more violent than Shirl's, the bitchiness is played for laughs where Shirl's exclusionary rhetoric foreshadows the homophobic message scrawled across the side of Priscilla: 'AIDS fuckers go home.' Even if there exists a bond between white males in the pub, the film makes clear that this is temporary and localised for it does not protect the queens from becoming the targets of hate crime. Ironically, the scene implies that the stronger bond exists between Shirl and the white men because she seems to enjoy a level of acceptance in the town that the queens do not and even participates in the homophobic discourses aimed at the queens. Nonetheless, the film can be seen to offer a corrective to this sort of behaviour for there is a sense of poetic justice in the way Shirl's comments precipitate a humiliating rejoinder and Bernadette's treatment of Shirl is repaid by an anonymous vandal. In both cases, ill-will between socially marginalised, queer characters is symbolically punished in the narrative, thus

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I find it hard to accept the claim that the film's articulation of stereotypes represents an endorsement of either misogyny or white male privilege.

There is no denying that there are few women in the film, but rather than dismiss this as evidence of the film's misogyny, it is more productive to use this as a springboard for thinking about the underlying reasons for why women are so marginalised in the queens' lives. Richard Dyer notes that the homosocial dynamics of the gay community 'may reveal that for all our interest in femininity, we're often not really interested in women.'<sup>26</sup> This observation offers useful insights into one possible reason why gays and lesbians have historically had mixed success in joining forces to achieve equal rights in the real world. If the film had portrayed greater interaction and cooperation between the queens and female characters, critics could have rightly accused it of whitewashing the actual animosity that exists among the members of LGBT communities. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that Tick's ex-wife, Marion, a lesbian single-mum, plays a crucial though subtle role in the narrative's progression. The physical journey from Sydney to Alice Springs, undertaken at her invitation, facilitates the queens' symbolic voyages of self-discovery and Tick's reunion with his son. When viewed as a unifying agent who helps Tick acknowledge the fullness of who he is as a person (drag queen and father), Marion's character acquires greater significance than critics have acknowledged. Even more importantly, by framing the relationship between the queens and the lesbian character in this way, the film can be seen to gesture toward the value of cooperation beneath the LGBT umbrella.

This celebration of cross-cultural cooperation can also be observed in the queens' interaction with the Aboriginals they encounter in the desert. While it is true that the desert-dwellers come to the aid of the queens when Priscilla breaks down, the interaction between the queer and the Indigenous can be interpreted in more egalitarian terms than critics have allowed. Pamela Robertson claims that 'the Indigenous characters in Priscilla, while diegetically celebrated, are nevertheless inscriptions of an Aboriginality typical of a racially supremacist white Australian imagination.'<sup>27</sup> However, one might just as easily invert that perspective by seeing how the film evokes a stereotypical vision of Aboriginality within a diegesis that celebrates cross-cultural exchanges. The film could have either ignored Aboriginal characters entirely or downplayed their interaction with the queens by making the rescue in the desert sequence a minor aspect of the narrative. But a fair amount of screen time is devoted to the encounter between two groups who have been historically victimised in a white, heteronormative society. When the queens perform their drag act as a gesture of gratitude to their rescuers, the 'audience' becomes so caught up in the moment that some even join in the rendition of Gloria Gaynor's gay anthem *I Will Survive*, whose uplifting lyrics gesture toward the capacity of the downtrodden to persevere against the

obstacles in their path. Some may be offended at the 'queering' of Aboriginal rituals, but the blending of traditional dance and the didgeridoo with the modern disco sound implies a mutuality between Aboriginal and drag cultures that appreciates both in equal measure.

Contrary to Robertson's view, this representation can actually be seen to take Aborigines out of a stereotypical, ahistorical context and root them firmly in the sexuality debate of the 1990s. Homophobia exists within Aboriginal communities just as anti-Aboriginal racism exists in gay communities. However, as Graham Willett's study of the history of gay and lesbian activism acknowledges there has been a growing sense of solidarity between the groups over the issues of AIDS and transgender people from traditional communities known as 'sistergirls'.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the young man who discovers the stranded queens and leads them back to his community seems to form such a singular connection with them that one might even see him as a closeted gay man who has been given an opportunity to indulge his inner queerness thanks to the appearance of the Sydney interlopers. Alternatively, he might just be an Aboriginal bloke who does not subscribe to homophobic prejudices. In any case, there seems to be a definite affirmation of mutual respect, which is rather significant in light of the historical tendency within Australian culture to simply ignore the existence or agency of Indigenous people.

Not everyone will accept the bifurcation between representation and ideology proposed here. But to the extent that depiction and ideological endorsement are not necessarily the same thing, it is incumbent upon readers/viewers to look beyond the surface aspects of representations that have been deemed negative or offensive to consider the nature and function of such images. Under the rubric of positive imagery criticism, the stereotypes on offer in *Priscilla* have become the primary basis upon which critical pronouncements have rested. But as Alan McKee asserts, 'attempts by critical writing to label *Priscilla* as 'racist' or 'misogynistic' or 'homophobic' are sacrificing too much of our understanding of the polysemic nature of texts in order to gain their 'political' leverage.'<sup>29</sup> In a more general critique Elayne Tobin argues that 'positive imagery criticism, even when dressed as a more savvy ideological critique, clearly sets serious limits upon political thought'; she adds that demands for a 'politically perfect subject of filmic representation' that offends no one should be abandoned in favour of historicised readings that locate representations as a 'starting point of critical analysis...not where one ends, but where one has to begin.'<sup>30</sup> This analytical strategy is useful in popular films like *Priscilla*, because, according to Tom O'Regan,

To be successful a popular film's work of social problematisation - its translation, mediation and

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hierarchisation - needs to seduce, convince, enlist, divert and entertain its audience. In its turn, entertainment makes problematisations its own, enlisting the social purposes of problematisation to its own diversionary purposes.<sup>31</sup>

Some viewers were clearly offended by stereotypical portrayals of characters, but brutal humour was also a draw for audiences. Thus, I want to focus on the ways in which the film's deployment of Australian humour and camp serve as a basis for engaging with the problematic of race, gender and sexual identities.

#### **4. The Critical Potential of Aussie Humour and the Camp Sensibility**

Irreverence toward the political correctness that underpins positive imagery criticism is *Priscilla's* trademark, and this trait also conditions the engagement with the complementary dynamics of Australian humour and the camp sensibility. *Priscilla* is the product of a culture in which the national funny bone is tickled by jokes that appeal to black humour, anti-authoritarianism, irreverence and self-deprecation. Refusing to take anyone or anything too seriously and relying on humour to get through difficult circumstances are widely regarded as throwbacks to the nation's brutal convict past.<sup>32</sup> Filmmaker Nick Parsons highlights the continuity between the cruelty of convict humour and comedies like *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* and *Muriel's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1994), noting that Australians 'don't respond to comedy unless it's painful.'<sup>33</sup> Light-hearted mockery, or 'taking the piss' to use the Aussie vernacular, aimed at everyone and everything can sometimes come across as off-colour humour that indulges racist, sexist and homophobic sentiments, especially when it aimed at individuals who experience actual discrimination as a result of their race, sex or sexual orientation. I would argue, however, that the narrative progression of *Priscilla* encourages viewers to perceive its cruel, crude humour as part of a camp critique of bigotry rather than an endorsement of it.

As critical terms, 'camp' and 'queer' continue to generate lively debate over their meaning and application, so rather than offer an objective definition of either, I shall simply clarify how the terms function in this study. The value of the term 'queer' lies in its inclusiveness with respect to the wide spectrum of sexuality and sexual behaviour. As Alexander Doty explains,

Queer was not only meant to acknowledge that there are many different ways to be gay or lesbian, but also to encompass and define other sexually defined minorities for whom the labels homosexual and/or heterosexual were less than adequate: bisexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered

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people, interracial couples whether homosexual or heterosexual, disabled sexualities, sadomasochistic sexualities whether homosexual or heterosexual, etc.<sup>34</sup>

Queerness, according to Doty, operates as a theoretical stance that ‘allows us to examine both straight and non-straight sexualities in order to deconstruct the ways and means that patriarchal hegemony constructs and maintains the idea that only one sexuality (married-straight-white-man-on-top-of-woman-sex-for-procreation-only) is normal and desirable.’<sup>35</sup> From the perspective of gender politics, it can be useful to avoid a blanket term like ‘queer’ in order to place the special circumstances of a particular group in sharp relief. In this context, however, I apply the queer label to *any* non-straight mode of sexuality or sexual performance in order to highlight how the film creates a spectrum of queer characters that disavow patriarchal, procreation-orientated straight sex, yet fail to see their common interests as socially marginalised members of society.

‘Queer’ and ‘camp’ are often related because of the latter’s association with non-straight writers and artists - most notably, Oscar Wilde. Queer isn’t always camp, but camp is always queer; and in the case of *Priscilla*, camp plays a vital role in the film’s treatment of queer identities. Jack Babuscio describes camp as a ‘gay sensibility’ that finds articulation through irony, aestheticism, theatricality and humour.<sup>36</sup> Critics like Susan Sontag have attempted to sever camp from its queer connotations,<sup>37</sup> but Babuscio insists that the sensibility is deeply rooted in a feeling of being at odds with the social mainstream where heterosexuality is ‘normal, natural, healthy behaviour’ while homosexuality is defined as ‘abnormal, unnatural, sick behaviour’.<sup>38</sup> Richard Dyer has also recognised camp’s usefulness as a weapon against the assumptions and practices that define the norm in mainstream society.

What I value about camp is that it is precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty and masculinity: it cocks an irresistible snook, it demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population.<sup>39</sup>

Because it stands as a gesture of resistance against the hetero-normative regime, camp is an inherently political concept, though this point is often lost on critics who think of it purely as an aesthetic of shallowness and mockery that sometimes fails to take things as seriously as it should. The trouble with this view is that it overlooks the fact that humour and superficiality can form the basis for social critique just as powerfully as serious drama does. Camp humour is especially potent because it is a sort of double-edged sword in

which surface-level wit is counter-balanced by layers of ‘underlying hostility and fear [...] imbued with self-hate and self-derogation.’<sup>40</sup> Babuscio explains that the hostility is aimed at the society that denies gays equal status at the same time that it is directed inwardly to foster a sense of ambivalence toward their own bodies and the qualities that alienate them from the mainstream. The aspects of camp outlined by Babuscio are not mutually exclusive, but provide a helpful springboard for thinking about texts.

Although reviews of the film acknowledged its camp attributes, these discussions tended to either confine the discussion to the outrageous costumes and mincing mannerisms of the queens or disparage the film’s limited engagement with camp sensibility. David Vallence and Monica Zetlin, for example, complained that the film had failed to explore ‘cultural situations with any real insight or cultural engagement’ as a result of its reliance on ‘stereotype and caricature that doesn’t treat either ‘camp’ with much respect or understanding.’<sup>41</sup> Stephan Elliott has dismissed these objections and insisted that *Priscilla* is nothing more than a light-hearted musical comedy that happens to feature gay, transgendered and drag characters. Significantly, his comments betray the existence of a political agenda by acknowledging a desire to rebel against the climate of political correctness:

The world is drowning in politics. We are not allowed to laugh any more at bad jokes, or practical humour. [...] That really annoys me, particularly with gay issues. Any film that’s gay themed is drowning in its own politics.<sup>42</sup>

In the spirit of pushing the envelope of good taste, he admits that everything from casting actors against type and including off-colour dialogue to playing stereotypes for laughs was a function of his desire to ‘go right up to the edge.’<sup>43</sup> He dismissed the idea that the film was a camp movie and even predicted that Australian audiences would not regard it as a flagship gay film because it featured actors they knew and loved. Though, he conceded that despite his best efforts to ‘steer people away’ from the camp/gay reading, ‘it is a camp movie, about camp character’ and ‘it’s going to get called a gay movie because the gay scene is completely encompassing it.’<sup>44</sup> While the filmmaker’s views are certainly of anecdotal interest, they have not and should not set the parameters for textual analysis. As a popular film that circulates within a certain social, political and cultural context, it is right that we look closely at what is going on in the film. Stereotype and caricature are not necessarily the enemies of constructing engagement with identity issues, and by drawing upon Babuscio’s work, I shall demonstrate how the text can be seen to offer a critique that has been overlooked by critics.

Irony refers to incongruous situations, such as the presence of elaborately dressed drag queens from Sydney in quiet, traditional bush towns and Aboriginal people disco dancing with the queens in the middle of the Outback. This incongruity generates laughs whilst providing a basis for exchanges between characters who represent marginalised social groups. When the queens reach out to work cooperatively with people like Bob and the Aborigines, they find solutions to their automotive difficulties. By contrast, the mutual antipathy that develops between the queens and Cynthia precludes any sort of cooperation, and the result is a humiliating experience for the queens as Cynthia upstages them. The antagonistic behaviour among socially marginalised characters is rooted in a failure to recognise common ground and work in unison to achieve equality and official recognition. The queens are vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse, but they unleash a stinging, sarcastic mode of humour on those around them as a measure of their own sense of inferiority and marginalisation. Likewise, Shirl and Cynthia align themselves with the heteronormative majority by mocking the queens. This plays out a variation on the theme of false consciousness because characters that actually have a fair amount in common are placed at loggerheads with each other as each uses wit and humour to degrade others and reinforce their own sense of belonging to the 'norm'. Thus, the film can be seen to promote reconciliation by showing that cooperation yields success where divisiveness accomplishes nothing.

Aestheticism deals with the way that style functions as a projection of the self and facilitates connections between art and life. The film takes up this theme by showcasing how artistic expression is integrated into the queens' lives. Numerous sequences show the queens dancing and lip-synching, both in rehearsal and on-stage. Their extravagant fashions parallel their over-the-top personalities. Moving seamlessly (and democratically) between operatic arias sung by Maria Callas and disco classics by the likes of ABBA, the soundtrack pays tribute to artists who evoke queer pleasures and enjoy a wide following among gay men in an aural pastiche that enhances the film's rich tapestry of extra-textual references. Even the visually stunning set pieces that recur throughout the film (i.e. a drag queen posing on top of the speeding bus as the wind catches the billowing fabric of her dress) distil the dramatic qualities of ordinary events. The queens are artists of a sort, but their failure to win audience approval almost everywhere they perform can be seen to signify their professional inadequacies as well as their status as cultural outsiders. Art is not just part of the queens' daily existence. It is a window on their inner selves and a defence mechanism that helps them cope with the bigotry directed at them.

Because aesthetic concerns tend to focus on the outward, visible projection of art in a discourse that often privileges surface appearance over substance, they are often intertwined with theatricality. The film highlights

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the performative nature of life both in terms of the drag acts and the ways in which the queens' stage personas inhabit their identities in 'real' life. Sexuality and gender are also framed as modes of performance in a challenge to mainstream assumptions about identity and normality. As Ros Jennings and Loykie Lomine observe,

[T]he creation of the three main protagonists who so clearly disrupt hegemonic notions of a stable trinity between sex, gender and sexuality invited audiences to question their own perceptions of Australian identities and lifestyles. Pre-conceived notions of the relationship of the mainstream to the margins become destabilised by putting these three characters at the centre of the narrative.<sup>45</sup>

Equally significant is the way that performance offers a transient space for communicating across differences. The drag act brings together the three queens and sustains their bond despite the spats and disagreements they have along the way. The quirky rendition of *I Will Survive* offers a vision of unity between Indigenous and settler cultures. The drinking contest acquires an aura of performance as Bernadette and Shirl, cheered on by an audience of onlookers, resolve their differences in a good spirited competition to see who can drink the other one under the table. It is by performing the ping-pong routine that Cynthia manages to win a modicum of admiration from the queens. And perhaps most significantly, it is after witnessing the queens' drag act that Tick's son comes to love and appreciate his father. The temporary nature of most of these connections speaks to the existence of prejudices and social barriers that prevent various groups from putting aside their differences. But by highlighting the redemptive power of performance in this way, the film can be seen to promote cooperative dialogue and good will as the basis for improving relations among marginalised social groups.

If we apply Babuscio's analysis of the feelings that underpin camp humour, it becomes clear that all of these characters harbour feelings of anger toward a society in which they aren't completely accepted and deep ambivalence toward their own identities as 'others'. Because humour is the means by which these feelings are tapped and the mechanism for showing the antagonism between marginalised constituencies that have a vested interest in uniting for a common goal, it can be seen as part of the film's social critique. The antidote to discrimination lies in forming bonds with the 'other', challenging as that may be. But as Tick and Felicia return to the safety of Sydney's gay community, the film raises the question of whether multicultural unity is possible. Are the city limits in place to keep the queens in or to keep others out? While no answer to this query is forthcoming in the film, there is merit in simply raising the issue of how Aboriginal, immigrant,

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queer and Anglo-European white identities will be absorbed into the concept of Australianness. Along those same lines, there is tremendous value in assisting with the liberation of openly queer characters from the cinematic closet to which they had been confined for decades, thereby challenging assumptions about the nature of sexual identity.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, by promoting a general message of acceptance of different cultures and facilitating further public debate about the identities being depicted, *Priscilla* offers a meaningful intervention in the discourses of multiculturalism and gay rights that were circulating at the time of its release.

### 5. Contextualising *Priscilla*

*Priscilla* can be seen as an icon of 1990s Australian culture on a variety levels. As a road movie, the film belongs to a genre that taps into the national preoccupation with land, movement and identity. Rama Venkatasawmy asserts that:

The road movie is about mobility and freedom...the impetus for this particular notion of 'journeying' is generally triggered by: the Escape motive - from country, from the city, the past, family, 'home', authority or enemies; the Quest motive - for people, places, 'home', objects or understanding of self.<sup>47</sup>

Concepts like journeys, the past, freedom, home and understanding of self resonate in a nation where settlement was itself the product of a journey; where freedom was the goal of convicts as well as adventurers seeking their fortunes in the new land; where the ongoing tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures leaves both sides feeling displaced and where the sense of self and home must be negotiated among native born white Australians, Aborigines, and migrants. Hilary Harris calls *Priscilla* 'the most important road film of the last twenty years in Australia that has attempted to create a narrative in which the normally (or, perhaps nominally) separate discourses of indigeneity and immigrancy are both featured.'<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the film 'was made and released during a significant period in the distinct but related histories of indigenous and immigrant discourses' defined by the Mabo verdict, which affirmed the legal rights of Indigenous peoples, and the Keating government's increasingly pro-Asia stance.<sup>49</sup>

Another significant aspect of the film's topicality is its proximity to developments in the legal and social status of gays and lesbians. *Priscilla* was released at a time when Paul Keating's Labour government was taking steps to enhance the visibility and legal rights of gays and lesbians. In 1991, Keating became the first Australian Prime Minister to support to the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The following year, his government lifted the

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ban on gay and lesbians serving in the armed forces. In 1993, the government opposed the anti-gay laws in Tasmania, which were challenged in the *Toonen v. Australia* legal case and subsequently found to be in breach of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights because they sought to regulate activities that were a matter of private morality.<sup>50</sup> And in 1994, the government introduced the Commonwealth Human Rights (Sexual Conduct) Bill. Despite introducing interdependency visas that extended immigration rights to same-sex couples in 1995, the Labour government stopped short of endorsing the Sexual Discrimination Bill initiated by the Australian Democrats in a move that reflected the persistence of divided opinion on the question of gay rights. Tom O'Regan picks up on the correlation between advances in the visibility of gays and lesbians in the public sphere and trends in filmmaking with his observation that:

The general direction of contemporary social problematisations becomes part of the social tapestry of film production and consumption. *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *The Sum of Us*, are sensible against the background of the Sydney Gay Mardi Gras as a nationally televised event in 1994, the acceptance of gays in the military, the treating of gay couples as families in the 1994 census, and an anti-discrimination campaign combating homophobia.<sup>51</sup>

Along with real life legal and social developments, films that dealt openly with homosexuality serve as indexes of an important shift in Australian culture. Indeed, if further proof were required to demonstrate *Priscilla's* cultural significance, one need look no further than the closing ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympics where the celebration of Australian culture included a massive *Priscilla* bus surrounded by lavishly costumed drag queens dancing to Kylie Minogue's version of ABBA's *Dancing Queen* in an homage to both the national cinema as well as Sydney's vibrant gay culture.

All of these signs of changing attitudes toward homosexuality need to be situated in relation to the 'cultural anxiety' that Jennings and Lomine identify in 'expressions of queer desire and issues of homosexuality' in Australia. They note that

The outback myth, until recently so foundational to notions of Anglo-Celtic Australian settler identity, was established on homosocial values of mateship and unsurprisingly, therefore, in order to ward off accusations of homosexuality it was also swaggeringly 'anti-poofter'. As a result, it would be true to say that in Australia, filmic representation

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of queer characters remained securely within the closet until the 1990s.<sup>52</sup>

*Priscilla* engages directly with the potent homophobic sentiments that underscored the cultural context in which it was produced and viewed by showing the contradiction, conflict and struggle that exists between those who endorse a hetero-normative regime and those who embrace queerness and reject the oppression of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered people. In doing so, the film participates in what Alan McKee has described as a 'nation-building project in recent cinema', which largely eschews the 'insistent use of recognisable symbols of Australian-ness...in favour of more banal and everyday ways of representing parts of Australian culture, or returning to them in an openly parodic way.'<sup>53</sup> The over-the-top, camp sensibility that informs the stereotype-laden world represented in *Priscilla* mobilises the film's parodic take on everything from bush town lifestyles and the Australian landscape to the drag queens themselves. As an irreverent view of culture, the film represents part of a 'new cinematic turn' that seems 'to fall in line with the more far-reaching effects of Australian multiculturalism.'<sup>54</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

One of the most powerful themes of the film is the potential for artistic expression to create discursive spaces in which groups and individuals can come together despite their differences. Not all of the exchanges between characters are successful in the long term, but at least they constitute a step in the right direction. It is my contention that the film itself operates along those lines by providing an opportunity for audiences to think more carefully about the representation of socially marginalised groups. As I have endeavoured to demonstrate in this essay, it is important to branch out from simplistic notions of positive and negative depictions in order to situate representations in relation to the ideological stance of the text as a whole. Unlike Glapka's analysis, which positions advertisements as conduits of hegemonic ideologies whose discursive cloaking facilitates internalisation rather than resistance on the parts of readers/consumers, I argue for a greater awareness of the subversive potential of the filmic text itself. In an Australian context, the concept of hegemony is tied to the maintenance of an Anglo-Celtic settler culture that has historically privileged white, heterosexual men. Thus, by exposing racism, sexism and homophobia within society, *Priscilla* becomes a site of hegemonic resistance. What is most striking about this example, however, is the way in which selective readings have reinscribed the film within the hegemonic discourses its content critiques and disrupts. Since the film makes no pretence of realism, it operates outside of the artifactuality/actvirtuality couplet discussed by Hansen, but the notion that

virtual worlds have the capacity to engage with actual issues without being confined to the same constraints as the real world can be as pertinent to films as it is to the internet. The film is consumed in the real world where there is plenty of scope to challenge the ideologies and ideas being disseminated (as the example of *Priscilla* so aptly demonstrates). At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that the fictional framework of films like *Priscilla* offers the latitude to engage subversively with issues in a way that non-fiction media cannot do without triggering the sorts of constraints cited by Hansen.

This essay has outlined compelling evidence of how *Priscilla's* use of the camp aesthetic enables a subversive treatment of identity politics. But even if one stops short of seeing it as a critique, the examples of textual resistance to hegemonic discourses warrant at the very least a more nuanced approach to thinking about the ideological work of the film. Rather than fixate on whether a film represents a group in a positive way, a more productive approach is to think about how identity is treated in the film *as a whole*. While it is perfectly valid to find things offensive, it would be useful to use this as a starting point for dialogue rather than the final word on the film. Dialogue provides the basis for examining the offending material vis-à-vis the filmic text as a whole, which fosters a more accurate reading of ideology and sheds light on the purposes served by offensive content. Yes, *Priscilla* plays with stereotypes and even derives humour from them. But the film offers more than just a laugh; it invites us to rethink the assumptions that have guided debates about identity politics in Australia and the dynamics of representation as a whole.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, S Elliott (dir.), PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> R Kolker, *Film, Form, and Culture*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., McGraw-Hill, Boston, 2006, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance TW Adorno and M Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> See R Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1957; R Williams, *Culture and Society*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1958; R Williams *The Long Revolution*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1961; E P Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1963.

<sup>6</sup> A Willis, 'Cultural Studies and Popular Film,' in *Approaches to Popular Film*, J Hollows and M Jancovich (eds), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180-1.

<sup>10</sup> T O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, London, Routledge, p. 284.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> E Rustin, 'The 'Glitter' Cycle', in *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, I Craven (ed), London, Routledge, 2000, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> T O'Regan, 'Beyond 'Australian Film'? Australian Cinema in the 1990s', 13 March 2002, viewed on 4 July 2008,

<<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/1990s.html>>. The author also cites J Cafarella, 'Filipino Women Blast *Priscilla* for Portrayal of Worst Stereotype'. *The Age*, 7 October 1994.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> C Berry, 'Not Necessarily the Sum of Us: Australia's Not-so-Queer Cinema'. *Metro Magazine*, no. 100, 1995, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Director Stephan Elliott alludes to the film's popularity among LGBT audiences in J Epstein, 'Stephan Elliott: The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert'. *Cinema Papers*, no. 101, October 1994, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> K Farrell, '(Foot)Ball Gowns: Masculinities, Sexualities and the Politics of Performance'. *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 63, 1999, pp. 157-64.

<sup>20</sup> For more examples of critical reviews of the film, see A McKee, 'How to Tell the Difference Between a Stereotype and a Positive Image: Putting *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* into History'. *Screening the Past*, University of LaTrobe, 1 March 2000, viewed on 25 July 2008, <<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr0300/amfr09b.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> R Murray, *Images in the Dark: Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video*, revised edition, Titan Books, London, 1998, p. 470.

<sup>22</sup> M Breen, 'The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert', in *Australian Film 1978-1994: A Survey of Theatrical Features*, S Murray (ed), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 376.

<sup>23</sup> J Champagne, 'Dancing Queen? Feminist and Gay Male Spectatorship in Three Recent Films from Australia'. *Film Criticism*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1997. (Accessed via Questia, pagination not available).

<sup>24</sup> Rustin, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>25</sup> E Williams, 'Priscilla, Ginger and Fred'. *Quadrant*, June 1995, p. 54.

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- <sup>26</sup> R Dyer, 'Gay Misogyny', in *The Culture of Queers*, London, Routledge, 2002, pp. 47-8.
- <sup>27</sup> H Harris, 'Desert Training for Whites: Australian Road Movies'. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 86, 2006, p. 99
- <sup>28</sup> G Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 2000, p. 250.
- <sup>29</sup> McKee, op. cit.
- <sup>30</sup> E Tobin cited in Champagne, op. cit.
- <sup>31</sup> O'Regan, *Australian Cinema*, p. 285.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Australian Humour', *Culture and Recreation Portal*, Australian Government, 17 December 2005, viewed on 25 July 2008, <<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/humour/>>.
- <sup>33</sup> N Parsons, 'Introduction', in *Myth and Meaning: Australian Film Directors in Their Own Words*, P Malone (ed), Currency Press, Sydney, 2001, p. x.
- <sup>34</sup> A Doty, 'General Introduction', in H Benschhoff and S Griffin (eds) *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 5.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp.5-6.
- <sup>36</sup> J Babuscio, 'Camp and the Gay Sensibility', in Benschhoff and Griffin, *Queer Cinema*, pp. 121-136.
- <sup>37</sup> S Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1964.
- <sup>38</sup> Babuscio, op. cit., p. 121.
- <sup>39</sup> R Dyer, 'It's Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going', *The Culture of Queers*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 52.
- <sup>40</sup> Babuscio, op. cit., pp. 127-8.
- <sup>41</sup> D Vallence and M Zetlin, 'The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (review)'. *Cinema Papers*, 101, October 1994, p. 62.
- <sup>42</sup> S Elliott quoted in Epstein, op. cit., p. 6.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>45</sup> R Jennings and L Lomine, 'Nationality and New Queer Cinema: Australian Film' in *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader*, M Aaron (ed), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, p. 146.
- <sup>46</sup> For more the marginalisation of queer characters in cinema see D Verhoeven, 'The Sexual Terrain of the Australian Feature film: Putting the Outback into the Ocker', in *The Bent Lens: A World Guide to Gay and Lesbian Films*, C Jackson & P Tapp (eds), Australian Catalogue Company, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 25-32.
- <sup>47</sup> R Venkatasawmy et al., 'From Sand to Bitumen, From Bushrangers to 'Bogans': Mapping the Australian Road Movie'. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 2001, p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> Harris, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> For an explanation of the case, see S Pritchard, 'Gay Rights Victory at UN', Australasian Legal Information Institute, 1994, 12 January 2008, <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/HRD/1994/2.html>>. By focusing on homosexuality in terms of private morality, the case was able to sidestep the moral status of homosexuality in general, the right to equality before the law, and the legal imperative to offer gays and lesbians protection from discrimination.

<sup>51</sup> O'Regan, *Australian Cinema*, p. 262.

<sup>52</sup> Jennings and Lomine, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>53</sup> McKee cited in *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

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