Imagined Geographies:
Women’s Negotiation of Space in Contemporary Australian Cinema, 1988-98

Catherine Simpson
BA (Hons) University of Western Australia, 1991

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, Perth, 2000
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.
Abstract
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*Imagined Geographies: Women's Negotiation of Space in Contemporary Australian Cinema* is an exploration of the nexus between gender and locale in films from the last decade, 1988-98. This thesis examines the way meaning is made through the negotiation of diverse geographies by central female protagonists in a selection of recent Australian feature films. The films I analyse were predominantly produced by female writers and/or directors.

In the context of Australian Cinema, locale is an area much talked about but little theorised. It is an issue which remains in the background of much scholarship and is often tangential to many arguments but rarely constructed as a central concern. Where it is foregrounded, as in Ross Gibson’s work, it is reduced to the significance of landscape or ‘natural locations’ rather than examining the diversity of its manifestations.

Two notable but related spatial shifts have occurred in Australian cinema of the 1990s. The first is a change in industrial practice. Female artists are now creating spaces for themselves in *mainstream feature* filmmaking — spaces traditionally occupied by men. This trend is away from constructions of a distinctly feminist cinema or counter-cinema which was identifiable in the 1970s. Second, there is a shift in the character of on-screen space. The presence of growing numbers of women writers, directors and producers in the Australian film industry is shifting the cinema’s focus away from traditional ‘masculine’ topographies — the pub, the prison and the outback — thus allowing explorations of other spaces and visions to develop. I am arguing therefore that there is a *feminization of space* occurring in Australian cinema.

In this thesis I investigate representations of so-called traditional ‘feminine’ or domestic domains. The place of the gendered body and embodiment in films is a central concern and is theorised in the first chapter. As we move through the thesis chapters, sexed bodies enacting gender in a variety of ways and in different zones — the car, the house, the suburb and the country town — will be explored. Through these analyses I examine the methods some film directors employ to problematize space in such a way that their work overcomes the limitations of its previously dominant representations. This thesis is primarily an attempt to open up the field of criticism to acknowledge the diversity of locales which exist within the rich tapestry of Australian Cinema.
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Previous Publications


Part of an earlier version of Chapter Two was presented at the "National Cinema: Sites of Resistance Conference"; the bi-annual Australian and New Zealand Film and History conference in Brisbane, in December 1998.

A portion of Chapter Two was also published as “Notes on the Significance of Home and the Past in Radiance”, Metro Magazine, No. 119, 1999, 28-31.

An interview carried out with Radiance’s director, Rachel Perkins, was published in the same edition of Metro: “An Interview with Rachel Perkins – Director of Radiance”, Metro, No. 119, 1999, 32-34. It appears as Appendix One at the back of this thesis.