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Woolloomooloo or Wapping? Critical responses to *The Sentimental Bloke* in 1920s London and the normalization of the inner-city working class

ABSTRACT

This article explores the British reception of the first film adaptation of C. J. Dennis' verse poem The Sentimental Bloke, and traces the tendency of contemporary London critics to re-align the film's inner-city character 'types' with those much closer to home. Whilst contemporary Australian reviews tended to regard the central characters as typical Australian 'larrikin' types, London critics consistently compared them with – and occasionally even mistook them for – their own inner-city working class types. References to cockneys and costers abound in a process of normalization that saw Sydney's urban working class identities subsumed by that of their more familiar English cousins. Framed by an investigation of themes of 'realism', 'authenticity' and 'universality', this article asks why London critics may have needed to normalize certain aspects of the film and ponders what that

KEYWORDS

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1. The lengthy delay between Carroll and Gaumont's trade showings of *The Sentimental Bloke* in 1920 and its general release in 1922 can be attributed to an entrenched system of 'forward-booking' in place throughout the United Kingdom. Referred to as an 'antiquated system' by a *Times* critic (Anon 1920f), it was vigorously debated at industry meetings and in the pages of the trade press in the early 1920s and was largely phased out by the time Longford's second C. J. Dennis adaptation, *Ginger Mick* (1920), was shown in Britain.

process might say about urban identity and broader British notions of Australia and 'Australianness' in the 1920s.

When *The Sentimental Bloke* (Longford 1919) screened at a private preview in Adelaide in November 1918, an overwhelmingly positive review in *The Advertiser* concluded with the suggestion that, when shown overseas, the film would 'reveal to the world outside something of the originality and unconventionality of the Australian' (Anon 1918). Yet when worldwide rights-holder E. J. Carroll followed the film's domestic success by taking it to British audiences, a deliberate effort was made to play down this originality and unconventionality in favour of a 'universality' that made its story applicable to any city and across any class barrier, but also facilitated a process of linguistic normalization amongst British critics.

Although Australian films had graced British screens prior to 1920, Longford's 'uniquely Australian' film was the first to make a real impact on the British market and prove (albeit fleetingly) that Australian productions could compete with the best that Britain, Europe or the United States had to offer. Produced by the Adelaide-based Southern Cross Feature Film Company, *The Sentimental Bloke* is a gently comic tale of life and love set amongst Sydney's inner-city working class milieu, starring vaudeville performer Arthur Tauchert as Bill, a 'down-at-heel n'er-do-well'. Doreen – his prospective 'tart', or love interest – is played by Lottie Lyell, one of Australia's first screen stars (and Longford's constant on- and off-screen collaborator until her untimely death in 1925). Ample support is provided by Gilbert Emery as Bill's 'cobber', 'Ginger' Mick. Despite being adapted from the wildly popular vernacular verse of C. J. Dennis, the film initially faced rejection by the all-powerful Australasian Films combine, who refused to screen it in their Union Theatres chain (Pike and Cooper 1980: 120). Picked up by Queensland theatrical entrepreneur and exhibitor E. J. Carroll, it eventually achieved great success in Australia before Carroll ventured overseas in the hope of selling it onto the British and American markets.

After Carroll's initial British trade showing in September 1920 at the Alhambra Theatre in London, *The Sentimental Bloke* was snapped up by Gaumont-British for exploitation throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland. During the film's eventual release onto British screens in 1922¹, London critics greeted *The Sentimental Bloke* with the same unequivocal praise it had already received in Australia. But while Australian reviews had praised the film's inherent 'Australianness', the reactions of London-based critics were marked by a distinct tendency, conscious or otherwise, to normalize the film's locations, characters and language for local audiences. London critics translated these three key elements into a set of references more familiar to their readers, whilst providing direct correlations to the Bloke's nearest imperial neighbour, the London Cockney.

In order to understand this shift in emphasis, this article sets out to survey the subtle shades of terminology and phraseology that separate the opinions of Australian critics and their London counterparts. By investigating how location, character and language each played an important role in formulating contemporary critical understandings of *The Sentimental Bloke*, it examines how the film's setting amongst a relatively overlooked inner-city, working class milieu – infused with a dose of heretofore unseen 'realism' – required London critics to rethink how they described films to their readers, and led them to apply a set of readily identifiable, culturally specific reference points.

THE BLOKE ARRIVES IN LONDON

Following the success of *The Sentimental Bloke* in Australia, E. J. Carroll and his associate Frank Talbot arrived in London with the express intention of selling it into British distribution. Keen to highlight the film's novelty as a product of the Australian industry, they also pushed its universality, presenting it as a story that would appeal to audiences across the world, regardless of class or nationality. Carroll and Talbot introduced the film via a series of 'interviews' with the key trade journals, before scheduling a trade showing at the prestigious Alhambra Theatre on 17 September 1920. In an interview with *The Cinema*, Carroll did his best to emphasize the film's unique provenance, as well as its universal appeal: 'it was born in Australia, developed in Australia, and produced in Australia, but it tells the oldest and the most popular story in the world' (Anon 1920a). He was also keen to play up the film's appeal across class boundaries, noting that 'though the story concerns people in a humble walk of life, it reaches every class [...] the theme is eternal, common to all countries, possessed by all classes' (quoted in Anon 1920a). Meanwhile, Frank Talbot was feeding other parts of the trade press with a similar line. He informed *The Bioscope* that 'the appeal of the picture is not merely national, but universal [and] depends to no extent upon its Australian setting, but wholly upon its human interest' (Anon 1920b). In the same interview, Talbot also saw the need to defend the film's working class setting, assuring the trade that 'though the characters are all low in the social scale, the production is entirely free from coarseness' (Anon 1920b).

In giving notice of the trade showing to *The British-Australasian* – a periodical serving London's large Australian expatriate community – Talbot concluded his now standard marketing spiel with a suggestion that 'the "Bloke" is a humble member of society, whose prototypes may be found in any city in the world' (Anon 1920c). Indeed, far from suggesting that the film's main virtue lay in its Australian specificity – a key theme in domestic marketing – and thus in its potential exoticism for British (and Australian expatriate) audiences, Talbot once again advocated precisely the opposite, that *The Sentimental Bloke* would work outside Australia precisely because it told a story of 'universal interest' (Anon 1920c).

Once they had acquired the film for distribution, Gaumont-British maintained Carroll and Talbot's steadfast marketing line in their publicity materials, highlighting its provenance – 'Australia's First Great Screen Classic' – but playing down its Australian specificity in favour of reiterating its universality and realism as a 'human story, full of heart, interest and humour' (Gaumont 1920). Gaumont also likened the milieu of *The Sentimental Bloke* with its London counterpart, drawing a direct comparison with *My Old Dutch* (Trimble 1915), a sentimental film about young Cockney lovers adapted from an Albert Chevalier music hall classic of the same name (Gaumont 1920).

SETTING THE SCENE: REALISM, AUTHENTICITY AND THE INNER-CITY

The working class had, of course, been fairly well represented in silent cinema up until the 1920s, particularly in Hollywood, but *The Sentimental Bloke* represented something of a departure. Working class characters had typically been presented as caricatured subjects of comedy or pitiful protagonists of heightened melodrama. Yet whilst *The Sentimental Bloke* might loosely be described as a comedy, the action within the film is by no means dictated by the same comedic impulse that underpins the work of popular chroniclers of caricatured

working class life such as Charlie Chaplin. At the same time, the film's disavowal of melodramatic tropes lends an almost uncomfortable authenticity that was achieved without sacrificing any of popular cinema's imperativity to entertain. David Boyd suggests that by replacing the 'whimsicality' of Dennis's book with 'gritty realism', Longford invested it with an 'unexpected sense of documentary authenticity', ensuring that 'the location shooting had the effect of establishing a tension in the film between the private story of the romance and the public world in which it is enacted' (Boyd 1998: 8–9).

In the comprehensive book that accompanies the National Film and Sound Archive's (NFSA) DVD release of the 2004 restoration, a lengthy section of Andrew Pike's chapter 'The life and times of *The Sentimental Bloke*' is devoted to what he terms 'The Voice of Authenticity' (NFSA 2009: 47–51). Speculating as to why the film comes across as 'realistic' and 'true to life' for audiences, Pike reiterates Boyd's earlier points and cites, amongst other things, the minimization of authorial intervention; a lack of 'melodramatic narrative devices' such as murder, mystery or tragedy; the predominantly 'natural' acting style; a genuine reluctance on behalf of the film-makers to treat their characters as either figures of fun or as 'sociological phenomena'; and, importantly, a general sense that the characters have accepted (and are relatively comfortable with) their 'lot' (NFSA 2009: 47–50). This confluence of naturalistic locations, style and delivery not only contributed to a uniquely 'realist' film, but also provided a vision of inner-city working class characters with a degree of authenticity that had rarely been portrayed on screen, and that London critics would struggle to interpret without reference to their own inner-city milieu.

When the film was first released in 1919, Australian audiences were happy to revel in the successful screen translation of a popular book, whilst critics busily attempted to explain the film's aura of authenticity. In Australia, critical consensus centred upon the film's 'realistic' portrayal of 'real Australian characters', with the location usually subsumed into broader discussions of this realism and authenticity. *The Advertiser* initially referred to the inner-Sydney setting as a 'sordid slum', but praised the film's naturalism as 'deeply human and true to the nature of a big class of city dwellers in the crowded areas' (Anon 1918). *The Herald* described the story 'coming, as it does from the slum areas of a big city' (Anon 1919d), whilst *The Argus* took a gentler line, simply noting that, 'like the characters, the localities [...] are thoroughly in keeping with the story' (Anon 1919a). *The Sydney Morning Herald* tactfully avoided references to Sydney's urban malaise with vague references to the 'realism of all the humble scenes' (Anon 1919f). Melbourne daily *The Age* – picking up on the transplantation of Dennis's original setting of that city's 'Little Lon' (Little Lonsdale Street), to the Woolloomooloo area of inner-Sydney – suggested that 'Melbourne City Council might well congratulate itself upon the fact that the camera is betraying to the other side of the world side of our own disgusting slums, but the cleaner under world of a sister State' (Anon 1919b).

Whilst Australian critics often referred to the film as providing 'realistic' portrayals of inner-city 'slums', London critics – understandably less familiar with Australia's urban milieu – needed to search for markers of their own. And given that there seemed to be little cinematic precedent for such stridently realistic portrayals of the working class, it is entirely reasonable that they should look for unequivocally 'authentic' characters within their own immediate surroundings and in their own 'slums'. In the national trade journal *Kinematograph Weekly*, the performances are claimed to be 'so perfect that at times we are almost tempted to think that the "types" portrayed are genuine

people [...] men and women of the slums, who, by some miracle performed by a master-producer, have been enabled to act their lives before the camera' (Anon 1920e). Whilst reflecting on the skill of Longford's direction, this statement also recapitulates just how uncommon it was to see working class lives portrayed on screen with such realism and pathos. A similarly positive notice in another trade paper, *The Cinema*, considered the film to be 'one of the most appealing and beautiful offerings seen upon the screen for many a long day', and praised its 'accurate' characterization and lack of 'false sentiment' (J. A. E. K. 1920). Referring more specifically to the milieu presented on screen, however, the critic admitted his own inadequacy in conveying the spirit of a production that he considered to be 'realism without its attendant crudity' (J. A. E. K. 1920).

Another important aspect of the British praise for the film's realism is what many critics believed, or at least hoped, it might teach the more hyperbolic film-makers at home and abroad. G. A. Atkinson, writing in *The Daily Express*, called the film 'just a page from the great book of ordinary experience ... what a lesson to the producers who toil laboriously after spectacular splendour and manufactured thrills!' (Atkinson 1920). *Kinematograph Weekly* was also keen to distinguish the film's realism and simplicity from the usual 'big features that cost hundreds of thousands (*vide* publicity) to make and employ "stars," whose smiles are stereotyped, whose every action is directed and stage-managed' (Anon 1920e). Echoing a commonly held view amongst contemporary London critics, these assertions also pre-figure the observations made by Pike 80 years later. Constant references to the film's ability to sustain audience interest without the lure of superficial melodrama, action or big name stars, are testament to Pike's notion that 'the comfortable existence with a location and within a social class is an essential part of the film's enduring power to engage and move audiences' (NFSA 2009: 49).

Picking up on the universality angle pushed by both Carroll and Gaumont, London-based trade journal *The Bioscope* paid tribute to the film's treatment of 'the life stories of simple, everyday folk all over the world', but also referred to the film's Australian specificity by recommending the 'interesting glimpses of Australian city and country life, of which we shall hope to see a great deal more in the future' (Anon 1920d). This particular review represents a fascinating dichotomy that has come to typify reactions to Australian cinema, as film-makers constantly struggle to find a balance between the provision of stories of universal (rather than parochial) appeal, and the desire to 'show-off' Australia's 'unique' (i.e. non-urban) physical and cultural landscape. Despite some notable exceptions, this rejection of a unique urban identity and inclination towards more 'familiar' representations of the Australian landscape remains a constant struggle for filmic portrayals of Australia to this day. Audiences at home and abroad often see rural and outback visions as somehow being inherently more 'authentic', with the portrayal of unique landscapes facilitating, in part, a refusal of universality as Australia strives to assert its cultural sovereignty in an increasingly globalized world.

Such debates were already well underway in the early 1920s. Filmed representations of its unique landscapes were used to 'show off' the country to prospective citizens, usually via Government initiatives such as the *Know Your Own Country* documentary series, produced throughout the 1920s. A critic for *The British-Australasian* attended Carroll's London trade showing, keen to see an exploitation of what were considered to be Australia's pictorial selling points (G. I. 1920). Despite often being supportive of the use of film to attract

new Australian citizens, *The British-Australasian's* review of *The Sentimental Bloke* displayed a palpable sense of disappointment with the film's inability to effectively showcase Australia to the world, suggesting that 'there was a chance of giving the production some local colour [...] but it was not taken advantage of' (G. I. 1920). This same sense of disappointment and missed opportunity spread to the publication's regular society columnist, 'Phyllis', who wrote of the full house at the Alhambra trade screening: 'The Australians there, on the look-out for familiar detail in the setting, were a little disappointed that more was not made of this part of the business' (Phyllis 1920). In concluding her brief notice, however, Phyllis did at least concede that a film this long, filled with performances that are so 'remarkably good, should not, I suppose, be subordinated to an exhibition of gum trees' (1920).

Thus, for Australians in Britain, let alone Britons themselves, a portrayal of Australia in the 1920s should have meant a portrayal of its 'unique' rural landscapes. A film such as *The Sentimental Bloke*, which largely focuses on urban landscapes, is therefore destined to be read by overseas critics via the similarities shared by cities throughout the modern world. Of course, this inherent lack of 'authentically' Australian signifiers implies that it was precisely the 'universality' of the film that ensured its success overseas, and allowed for the process of normalization undertaken by London critics. Consequently, it is within this same context that many modern commentators now view the pioneering use of authentic inner-city locations in *The Sentimental Bloke* as intrinsic to its ongoing importance and its status 'among the very best films made anywhere before 1920' (Bertrand and Routt 1989: 20).

A COCKNEY BLOKE: READING THE CHARACTERS

Bill, the 'Bloke' of the film's title, was commonly described by Australian critics as a 'larrikin'. This term had traditionally possessed largely negative connotations, denoting a member of Australian street gangs famed for violence and social menace during their 1880s heyday (Sidney John Baker quoted in Leitner 2004: 132). In the context of *The Sentimental Bloke*, however, William Routt considers 'larrikin' to be an 'index of perceived class status', citing its history in a more rigidly political context as referring to 'originally (male) members of the underclass, the *lumpenproletariat*, criminals and layabouts', but also acknowledging the softening of its connotations since the 1920s (2000: 27). This softening had been underway well before the 1920s, however, and authors such as C. J. Dennis had – at least in part – helped to both complicate and romanticize the concept, to the point that contemporary critics seemed to be using the term as one of endearment for someone known for defying social, cultural and political conventions in a playful manner. Though he considers *The Sentimental Bloke* to be a 'mini-ethnography of larrikin life', David Boyd refers to its treatment of 'working-class life in general and of larrikin life in particular' as being typical of the 'vogue for romanticizing larrikinism in literary works of the period' (1998: 10–13).

This romanticized tone was reflected in contemporary reviews. *The Age* found the film to be a successful 'essay in the portrayal of larrikin types [in which] every one of the characters is played in a distinctly Australian fashion' (Anon 1919b). *The Sydney Morning Herald* portrayed the film as a 'larrikin romance' (Anon 1919f), whilst *The Sunday News* saw Bill's story as 'the love and the woes of a two-up playing, bottle'o type of Australian city dweller' (Anon 1919e). Less inclined to dwell on the unseemly side of Bill's

character, Sydney newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* saw him merely as a 'typical Sydneysider, seen often with his Doreen on the Manly boat, or at Coogee or Bondi – and elsewhere, too, in his shadier moments' (Anon 1920g). Another Melbourne daily, *The Herald*, was one of the few to discuss the character of Doreen without specific reference to Bill, suggesting that she 'exhibited the peculiar pertness of the class in the early scenes, and the true womanly traits of the wife and mother' (Anon 1919c). It is perhaps unsurprising, given the title of the film and the reality of the times, that there is relatively little focus on Doreen as anything other than a love interest. Andrew Pike suggests that 'by the time Lottie Lyell played Doreen ... [Australian] audiences were familiar with women in Australian cinema being practical, down-to-earth and sensible characters while simultaneously being feminine and homely' (NFSA 2009: 57). And if Doreen's 'type' was so easily recognizable, it seems reasonable that critics should focus on the more nuanced characterization of Bill.

For all the references to Bill's 'distinctly Australian' larrikin character, and the film's general 'Australianness', there were differing interpretations, with *The Register* suggesting that 'the London coster has been reborn in Australia' (Anon 1919g). The oldest paper in South Australia – the first issue of which was printed in London before the colony was officially proclaimed – *The Register* uses wording that acts to de-localize Bill's position as a uniquely Australian character, whilst reinforcing an imperial notion of Australians as little more than displaced British citizens. More importantly, perhaps, the language used by *The Register* also prefigured a trend amongst London's critical community.

Whilst Australian critics usually settled for 'larrikin' in their description of Bill, London critics opted for an equally specific term, 'coster'. A colloquial abbreviation of costermonger, literally meaning apple-seller, the 'coster' is typically understood as an individual who sells goods from a stationary cart or stall, and is seen to have 'qualities of shrewdness, vigour, determination, and above all, wit' (Franklyn 1953: 64). When he first meets Doreen at the market, Bill is employed as a hawker – his term for it, with the ever-vacant 'h', is "awkin' – and is later seen selling goods on the street. Setting aside any notion of the film presenting particularly Australian 'types', however, British trade journal *The Cinema* preferred instead to consider Bill's character in this more familiar term, labelling him a 'coster type' (J. A. E. K. 1920). The same term was employed by most other London-based critics (E. W. F. 1920; Atkinson 1920; Anon 1920h), as they sought an equivalent 'type' in a process of unconscious normalization.

One London-based publication that might have been expected to highlight the unique 'Australianness' of Bill's character was *The British-Australasian*, yet much of their coverage sought to highlight the film's universality. Initially, it referred to Talbot's claim that 'prototypes of the "bloke" are met with in any city in the world' and his relaying of Scottish entertainer Sir Harry Lauder's assurance that 'the same sort of "blokes" as Bill may be found in Glasgow' (G. I. 1920). Curiously, *The British-Australasian* pounced on this notion as proof that the film does not 'possess a distinctly Australian atmosphere', adding that 'it might have been produced anywhere, and could apply alike to the Cockney tough and the denizen of New York's Bowery' (G. I. 1920). Once again, it is curious that a publication such as *The British-Australian*, charged in part with promoting Australian interest in Britain and so keen to advocate notions of Australian identity, might so strenuously deny that these characters are typically Australian.

One London-based critic who did employ terms specific to both Australia and Britain, was G. A. Atkinson of *The Daily Express*, whom *Variety* later

called the ‘most powerful film critic in Britain’ (quoted in Glancy 2006: 461). Describing the film as the ‘unaffected love story of a Sydney “larrikin” and his girl’, he immediately qualifies the unfamiliar term (already placed in inverted commas) by helpfully adding that ‘he is a coster’ (Atkinson 1920). Despite initially making use of the Australian parlance to hint at Bill’s general character, Atkinson still feels the need to normalize his description of Bill’s character for readers who are understandably more familiar with real life characters in their immediate surrounding than the intricacies of the Australian larrikin. A consistent supporter of *The Sentimental Bloke*, however, Atkinson was one of the few columnists in the daily papers to cover the film on the occasion of its release in 1922. Noting in a weekly round-up of releases that ‘twelve thousand miles of separation from the mother country are obliterated’, Atkinson quickly dissolves any suggestion of the film’s Australian specificity with a burst of unequivocal clarity: ‘How “English” these distant cousins are! The Antipodean slang of this Sydney coster and his “cliner” is just exaggerated Cockneyese’ (Atkinson 1922).

KNOWING THE LINGO

Perhaps even more than the realistic tone of its inner-city working class locations and characters, *The Sentimental Bloke* is notable for its densely poetic vernacular. Based as it was on the verse of Australia’s foremost dialect poet, the film’s use of vernacular is relatively unique in the silent era. Other films from the period set amongst the inner-city working class milieu typically restricted themselves to the occasional piece of slang in otherwise straightforward inter-titles. According to Routt (2000: 18), where such dense vernacular did exist in cinema at this time, it was characters ‘speaking’ in dialect, rather than the whole film being related in vernacular. In a film like *Suds* (Dillon 1920), for instance, Mary Pickford’s character often speaks in a cockney dialect, yet all expository inter-titles are written in ‘plain’ English. *The Sentimental Bloke*, meanwhile, is told entirely from Bill’s perspective in a kind of proto-voice-over narration and is thus entirely delivered in a broadly Australian vernacular dialect.

Despite repeated suggestions that the language of *The Sentimental Bloke* is ‘uniquely Australian’, Les Murray points out that ‘readers were enchanted to see an inventive colloquial language that was familiar and native, even if they did not themselves speak quite that way’ (1987: 8). Considering Dennis’s language to be a variation of the more common Australian dialect, Murray refers to it as carrying a ‘heavy overlay of argot ... [which] belongs to a milieu rather than a region, and rehearses the identity and rituals of the milieu’ (1987: 12). In discussing the reasons for the film’s success in Britain and concurrent failure to attract American audiences, Murray cites the ‘natural consonance between British and Australian street language’, and suggests that both derive, in part, from the ‘underworld Flash language of the eighteenth century East End slums’ (1987: 10). Indeed, C. J. Dennis himself would later acknowledge that, far from being a genuine dialect, it was a ‘linguistic mongrel’, with a moderated English vernacular tinted with both Irish and American inflections (cited in Routt 2000: 30).

Nevertheless, Australian audiences – for both the book and the film – embraced the vernacular, with critics quick to praise Dennis’ expressive and popular street verse. And whilst many critics could be accused of helping to romanticize this working class patois, one newspaper, *The Herald*, claimed that ‘the work is written in the vernacular of that type of Australian of poor education and rough exterior who frequents the big cities’, suggesting that

the film possesses 'little or no appeal to persons of education' (Anon 1919d). Although critical of the inner-city 'types' who use this vernacular, *The Herald* critic also claims that whilst Dennis is 'an artist who has succeeded in portraying Australians ... his characterizations could not possibly be confused with Englishmen, Irishmen, Americans, or any other variety of the Anglo-Saxon race (Anon 1919d).

In Britain, Dennis's vernacular language understandably sparked quite a number of column inches. After the initial Carroll trade show in September 1920, a review in *The Bioscope* referred to the 'vividly idiomatic dialect', but made no suggestion that the vernacular was so strong as to damage the film's commercial appeal (Anon 1920d). On the other hand, *The British-Australasian* – again wary about the nature of Australian portrayals – speculated about the ability of English film audiences to understand the language (G. I. 1920). Complaining that audiences were not supplied with a glossary similar to that which accompanied publication of the book, it was suggested that 'if the process be continued indefinitely the patrons of kinema [*sic*] will be familiar with every language but their own' (G. I. 1920). As well as taking a swipe at the use of lower-class vernacular, this sentence encapsulates the general tone of *The British-Australian*, which routinely took a particularly haughty line on all manner of topics and never really seemed to be totally behind *The Sentimental Bloke*, despite its supposed ability to promote an Australian industry. For *The British-Australian*, it would seem, the film was simply promoting the wrong kind of industry, and projecting the wrong image of an Australia that they sought to promote as a close contributor to the flagging notion of Empire.

Regardless of such concerns, the version of *The Sentimental Bloke* shown in Britain was unaltered from that shown in Australia (unlike the United States, where not even a shortened version with specially re-written vernacular inter-titles could gain the film a substantial release), and Gaumont re-produced the vernacular glossary in its publicity materials (1920). As a result, most British critics seemed to take the slang in their stride, expecting the audience to laugh along with the language and deeming the pictorial quality high enough that any lack of understanding stemming from the dense vernacular of the inter-titles would be negligible. Reviewing the Gaumont trade show, *The Times* picked on the film's linguistic gymnastics, claiming that C. J. Dennis's verse tells 'with all the necessary Australian slang, the life story of "the bloke"', before suggesting that 'at first it is somewhat difficult to understand some of the expressions, but their meaning soon becomes obvious, and after that it is a sheer joy to follow the life story of the hero both in picture and in verse' (Anon 1920f).

Reporting on the Carroll trade show a few months earlier, G. A. Atkinson of *The Daily Express* had been overwhelmingly positive, staking the poetic claim that 'Australia is a nest of singing birds, and the spirit that shines through the Antipodean Cockneyese of Mr. Dennis' poem is an enviable one' (1920). Although far from being the first to consider the influence of Cockney dialect on the verse of C. J. Dennis (or the vernacular language of working class Australia), by drawing a direct line between the English and Australian inner-city working classes, Atkinson also seemed to consider Dennis's verse language to be an extension of the well-established vernacular of London's East End, rather than a uniquely Australian patois. Muddying the waters ever further, however, Atkinson concludes his *Express* review by suggesting that the film's sub-titling constitutes 'a curious sort of slang, which seems to put even Americanese in the shade', and later placing further distance between Cockney

and Australian vernacular by asking ‘What new and fearsome prospect is opened up for the British picture-goer by these strange acrobatics in terminology?’ (1920).

‘MOOCHIN’ ON’

Atkinson’s many and varied responses to *The Sentimental Bloke* perhaps hint at the truer nature of the film. Whilst Carroll and Talbot were right to consider the film as having universal appeal, this universality also left it open to a range of interpretations and facilitated the process of normalization that allowed London critics to relabel locations, characters and language in order to make them more relevant to their readers. And although this might seem to be a fairly benign result of the film’s success, it does raise interesting questions about its ‘Australianness’ a cultural specificity that was partially lost (or obscured) when it was removed from its original context and dropped into another.

Although it by no means hindered the film’s success overseas, the stripping away of its uniquely Australian identifiers by London critics further complicates notions of Australian identity in Britain and general perceptions of the inner-city working classes in the early 1920s. These critical responses question the extent to which British readings of *The Sentimental Bloke*, and of Australian silent cinema in general, are informed by dominant British cultural contexts, as well as British knowledge, understanding and conception of, prejudices towards and fascinations with an often mythologized ‘Australia’. These sociocultural contexts also extend to a commonality shared amongst the global cinema industry, including Australia and Britain, which increasingly found itself fighting against the overbearing presence and influence of an American juggernaut that dominated foreign markets not only through the proliferation of films, but via strong commercial interests in production, exhibition and distribution.

This common adversary, combined with the obvious socio-economic ties between Britain and Australia, helped London-based critics to draw upon the film’s universality, finding reference points in their own immediate surroundings to describe the locations, characters and language of an inner-city milieu that was literally ten thousand miles away, but figuratively much closer. For Australian audiences, the success of *The Sentimental Bloke* sparked a ‘re-discovery of a uniquely Australian character, speaking in a uniquely Australian language, and behaving in a uniquely Australian way’ (NFSA 2009: 53). But this process of discovery was not exclusive to Australia. The film was met with widespread praise in Britain, and despite the focus on universality and the tendency of British critics to normalize the locations, characters and language of Bill, Doreen and Mick, it remained an Australian film, and British audiences were finally getting a taste of ordinary Australians in their natural environment.

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