Papers based on the Symposium held at Kings College, University of London, 5th & 6th September, 2019
Introductory Note

Speakers at the *Under Capricorn* Symposium were each given a 30 minute slot to deliver their paper and respond to questions. In preparing for this collection, all the papers have been revised and several have been considerably developed to provide additional context, argument and analysis. Apart from changes in format introduced to create a unified document (and in one or two cases to integrate images), the papers appear as the writers submitted them.

The papers are arranged in the order of the symposium programme, with one exception. Bertrand Tavernier was unfortunately unable to attend and his paper is the first the reader will encounter.

Papers that do not appear in this collection are marked by an asterisk in the programme.
An international production but ‘not much Australian’: authenticity and Australianness in *Under Capricorn*

Stephen Morgan

*Alfred Hitchcock: ‘I hope to make a film about early Australia called Under Capricorn [...] the chief character goes to Australia and deteriorates out there.’*

*David Clayton: Deteriorates?*

*AH: That’s what the book says.*

*DC: They won’t like that.*

*AH: Who?*

*DC: The Australians.*

*AH: Oh, I’ll put it right by having a man in a stage coach pull the old gag about England being the place convicts come from.*

*DC: They still won’t like it.*

*AH: Maybe not. We’ll see.*

(Clayton 1947: 59-60)

In mid 1947, Alfred Hitchcock gave an exclusive interview to *Filmindia*, a monthly, English-language periodical published in Bombay. Headed with a declaration that ‘Hitchcock Hates Actors’, this interview features his oft-cited maxim that ‘actors are like cattle’. Although later reprinted in an edition of the *Hitchcock Annual* dedicated to his interactions with India, that the overwhelming emphasis on accounts of this interview focus on the director’s relationship with his stars perhaps says as much about Hitchcock scholarship as it does about the man himself. It is equally telling that relatively few have drawn attention to Hitchcock’s similarly dismissive attitude toward Australia, and how it was borne out in the patchy production that was to follow. Given he expressed this sentiment in an interview with a magazine that was serving a still colonised audience, Hitchcock’s perfunctory remarks offer a valuable insight into the prevalent attitudes that underpinned the production of *Under Capricorn*, and the approaches taken to its nominal setting in another colonial space, Australia. When *Under Capricorn* was announced in 1946, pre-publicity highlighted the international nature of the production. The film was to be the product of Alfred Hitchcock and Sidney Bernstein’s newly established Transatlantic Pictures venture, with Hollywood-based
Swedish actress Ingrid Bergman playing an Irish lead, and plans to shoot in British studios with exteriors filmed in California. Australia seemed to offer little more than mere backdrop, and remained largely absent from any promise of ‘internationality’, despite the film being adapted from Helen Simpson’s novel, set in colonial New South Wales.

In reconciling that ‘Australian’ setting with Transatlantic’s deliberate decision against shooting on location, this article examines a number of the film’s textual artefacts of ‘Australianness’ within the broader context of post-war cinema. In re-centring the film’s setting, I highlight how Australia is ‘discovered’ and introduced, whose perspectives are offered, and how the legacies of British colonialism have shaped the film’s representations of gender, race and nationhood. Doing so might help us understand how ‘Australia’ is configured as a white settler space in abstracted visions of a post-war world, and the particular role of British (and Hollywood) cinema in that abstraction. Building on the work of James Morrison (2004) and Constantine Verevis (2011), among others, it is also possible to further articulate the film’s positioning of an emergent ‘Australia’, and what it might reveal about the presences and absences of (and within) this assemblage of British colonies. In many senses, Hitchcock’s struggle to depict an ‘authentic’ vision of colonial Australia might explain Under Capricorn’s relative ‘failure’ for audiences, past and present. At the same time, it also hints at the elusive nature of settler nationhood and cinema’s role in shaping visions of Empire and colonialism.

Locating Australia

In Australia, the announcement of Under Capricorn was greeted with a pointed recognition of that primary absence of ‘authenticity’. Relishing the irony that even the exteriors would be shot elsewhere, a Sydney Morning Herald headline announced: ‘British to make Australian film in California’, with the paper’s Hollywood correspondent, Lon Jones, noting that:

_Hollywood producers who have suffered criticism from Australians for their films with Australian backgrounds made in Hollywood are enjoying a laugh at Australia’s expense. [
 […] Hollywood is laughing, because though the picture is an English production, Hitchcock is planning to shoot the Australian exteriors in California. He thinks it a perfect double for Australia, and more convenient._ (Jones 1946a)

There seemed to be very little resistance to this, although it was hardly unusual, given Hollywood’s tendency to make do with Californian scenery or second-unit crews to give a sense of far-flung locales. Ingrid Bergman – who had previously starred in Hitchcock’s Brazil-set, but similarly studio-bound _Notorious_ (1946) – made an effort to convince the director to go on location,
telling him: ‘it’s set in Australia. Let’s go to Australia and do it there’ (Bergman & Burgess 1980, 175). Inevitably, however, she accepted the compromise of an English studio, with her interest in a location shoot motivated much less by authenticity, than by a simple desire to ‘get out of the backlot’ (ibid). Once in London, Hitchcock and Bergman tried to add at least a touch of ‘Australianness’ to proceedings when they met with Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley at the Savoy Hotel, where Chifley signed a copy of Simpson’s novel for Bergman, and they ‘fired a series of questions at each other about Hollywood and Australia’ (AAP 1948). Staged before the press, however, such encounters had little bearing on the film that followed. In June 1948, just before Under Capricorn was due on the studio floor at Elstree, British magazine Picturegoer confirmed that Hitchcock had ‘already finished location work in Hollywood, in a spot that closely resembles the Australian scenery required’ (1948, 3). By that time, London correspondent Dick Kisch had confirmed earlier fears for his Australian readers, telling them ‘there’s not going to be much Australian in Alfred Hitchcock’s film’ (1948).

Although Hitchcock never had any intention to shoot there, the immediate post-war moment had seen a renewed interest in films made in and about Australia, particularly those producers looking to expand the horizons of what constituted British cinema. A key player in that renewed interest was Ealing Studios, whose own publicity machine had – in the months prior to the announcement of Under Capricorn – been drumming up interest in their newly shot Australian cattle drama, The Overlanders (1946). The film’s director Harry Watt had just returned from Australia and was to be found regaling all and sundry with tales of adventure and hardship whilst shooting on location in the Australian outback. For this, and subsequent Australian productions, Ealing made a deliberate point of shooting on location, and using the vast landscapes on offer to build up a particular image of the Australian nation as a key ‘White Dominion’ of the emerging British Commonwealth (Morgan 2012). Hollywood had also expressed a renewed interest in Australian settings, with pre-publicity for Under Capricorn also noting RKO’s imminent release of the Rosalind Russell-led, bush nurse biopic Sister Kenny (Dudley Nichols, 1946), as well as Paramount’s pre-production of Botany Bay (John Farrow, 1952) and Metro’s plans (ultimately abandoned) to adapt Australian author Henry Handel Richardson’s sweeping historical novel The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney (Jones 1946b).

A key moment in Richardson’s novel was the 1854 Eureka Rebellion on the goldfields of Ballarat, in the colony of Victoria. And while Metro’s film stalled in development – despite reportedly having Greer Garson and Gregory Peck attached – this nation-building moment was instead the focus of Ealing’s second Australian production, Eureka Stockade (Harry Watt, 1949).
Taking some cues from the success of *The Overlanders*, and in sharp contrast to the aforementioned Hollywood productions, Ealing made good on their promise, and returned to Australian locations to recreate a colonial gold mining town, from scratch, in rural New South Wales (Morgan 2012, 169). The contrast between Ealing’s insistence on location production, and Hollywood’s studio-bound vision of Australia – and the relative positioning of these two contemporaneous costume dramas – provides a useful frame through which to tackle questions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘Australianness’ in post-war cinema. As we will see, a comparison of *Eureka Stockade* and *Under Capricorn* might also reveal the tensions, often overlooked, that remain inherent to the latter film’s outward claims of ‘internationality’.

‘Discovering’ Australia

Any consideration of *Under Capricorn*’s ‘Australianness’, however, must begin with the film’s own introduction of ‘Australia’, and the sprawling settlement of Sydney, in the British colony of New South Wales. The opening credits are branded across a map of the Australian continent, which immediately sets up a broader locale with a clearly defined coastline, but a wholly unfamiliar interior.
James Morrison notes that introductory maps such as this might ordinarily offer a ‘territorial version of nationhood, dependent on given zones that foster and dictate colonial discourses’, but Under Capricorn’s map – like Australia itself – appears as ‘de-stratified and de-contextualised’ (2004, 200). The simultaneous positioning of Australia as an at once colonized and pre-colonial space is echoed in the film’s opening voiceover, which provides a brief, deliberate curtailment of the continent’s settler colonial complexity:

In Seventeen Hundred and Seventy, Captain Cook discovered Australia. 60 years later, the city of Sydney, the capital of New South Wales, had grown on the edge of 3 million square miles of unknown land. The colony exported raw materials. It imported material even more raw, prisoners, many of them unjustly convicted, who were to be shaped into the pioneers of a great Dominion. In Eighteen Hundred and Thirty One, King William has sent a new governor to rule the colony, and now our story begins.

Accompanied by ‘patently artificial establishing shots’ (Verevis 2011, 179a), this opening voiceover lasts barely thirty seconds, and provides only a cursory, contextual snapshot of this pocket of ‘civilisation’, tenuously positioned on the fringes of a mass of ‘unknown land’. That contrast is framed even more explicitly in the official British tie-in book, where Sydney is described as ‘a small town on the edge of a continent still savage and still unknown’ (Mannon 1949, i). The opening sequence also offers the only wide views of the city in the entire film, although even the trained eye might have trouble identifying it specifically as colonial-era Sydney. The appearance of
the British flag gives some clues to imperial ties, and scholars of early Sydney may well note the historically accurate presence of the windmill, which also features on the cover of Simpson’s novel. Generally speaking, however, there is nothing identifiably ‘Sydney’ about this view, which in turn means there is nothing to stop other filmmakers from re-using the same matte to represent other mid-19th century settler colonial cities, hence Under Capricorn’s Sydney bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Old Chicago of Calamity Jane (Cook 2016).

From the ambiguity of the film’s vision of colonial Sydney, and throughout, we are thus invited into a figurative ‘Australia’ that is at once known and unknowable. Defined wholly by the presence of British colonists (and its future prospects as a British Dominion), the film introduces Australia in abstract, where it remains throughout the duration. Those viewers with little interest in the specificities of Australia may understandably read the opening scene as an example of the historical shorthand typical of romantic costume dramas of the period, which were often less concerned with ‘authenticity’ than they were with using historical backdrops as a setting for character-driven melodrama (Monk & Sargeant 2002, 2). In reading Under Capricorn for ‘authenticity’ and ‘Australianness’, however, these details, or the lack thereof, become crucial.

Marking space

Even if we disregard the question of Indigenous sovereignty, the opening voiceover’s claim that Cook ‘discovered’ Australia in 1770 is inherently problematic. From a European perspective, Dutch navigators had charted large portions of the coastline and set foot on the Australian mainland a century and a half earlier. In that sense, ‘claimed possession’ would be a more suitable word for Cook’s actions, but even then, his claim was only to the continent’s eastern seaboard (Moreton-
Robinson 2015, 112). Likewise, the act of referring to the entire continent as ‘Australia’ came somewhat later than Cook, and is typically attributed to Matthew Flinders, who mapped the southern coastline and circumnavigated the continent at the beginning of the 19th century (Morris 1898, 10-11).

Historical semantics aside, the film’s brief introduction to Sydney (and thus ostensibly to the colony of New South Wales) does provide some inkling towards broader narratives about a nation in formation, namely via those ‘wrongly convicted’ prisoners ‘who would be shaped into the pioneers of a great Dominion’. Almost immediately, however, it becomes clear that the film’s focus will not be a collective narrative of gradually emerging nationhood, as the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn to two central figures, the new Governor, Sir Richard Bourke (Cecil Parker), and his distant cousin, Charles Adare (Michael Wilding). In doing so, the film also undermines any sense of colonial authority, not least by invoking those ‘unjustly convicted’ men whose pioneering life - and thus the life of the nation – begins in a state of abjection (Morrison 2004, 201).

In a more practical sense, the preference for character over context (and the film’s disinterest in Australia as a subject) is made even clearer by the manner in which Bourke and Adare are introduced. Whilst the Governor arrives and immediately begins inspecting the assembled troops, his foppish cousin conspicuously positions himself front and centre of the assembled crowd. When Bourke begins a speech, in which he sets out his plans for the colony, his admission that ‘I know very little of your country, you know very little of me’ serves as a cue for the film to shift, both visually and audibly, away from him, and away from questions of governance and / or emergent nationhood. As Bourke’s speech trails off, with an ominous suggestion that ‘some of you have no very good record in the past’, our attention is drawn to an encounter between Adare and Cedric Potter (John Ruddock), the manager of the Bank of New South Wales. It is this conversation that instigates the narrative chain that will lead to Adare’s encounter with Sam Flusky (Joseph Cotton), and then his wife, Lady Henrietta (Ingrid Bergman).

The ambiguity of the film’s initial vision of colonial Australia, along with its subsequent preference for interior melodrama, might be extended to its difficulty in depicting the kind of outdoor action that is key to so many postwar Australian-set films. Like the film’s setting on the edge of ‘unknown land’, Under Capricorn’s exterior set-pieces are rendered similarly unknowable, with its most blatant concealment involving a key climactic moment late in the film. Confronted by Flusky, Adare steals his horse, falls off and limps back, requiring Flusky to take his pistol and shoot the horse, before returning to the house and shooting Adare in the midst of a scuffle. Shot in a single take, the camera remains indoors, with any exterior action concealed from the viewer. Where other
Australian-set films of the period made copious use of the adventurous possibilities of horses amid wide open spaces, this single moment encapsulates the stage-bound conceit of the film – already enforced by the dialogue of playwright James Bridie, and Hitchcock’s insistence on the stagey long-takes – forcing key dramatic action, and thus key opportunities for ‘authenticity’, offstage. The relative intimacy of the narrative in *Under Capricorn* – and its existence as a studio-bound film that is more interested in the colony’s ‘interior’ life, than in its vast exteriors – is specifically linked to formal choices such as these. Hume Cronyn – who worked on the screenplays for both *Rope* and *Under Capricorn* – later reflected on the relative fate of the two films. Noting the redeployment of *Rope*’s fluid, long-take style ‘to cover the vast panorama of colonial life in Australia’, Cronyn concluded that ‘the difference in the quality of the two stories was the difference between a miniature and an enormous landscape’ (quoted in Spoto 1991, 175). For Cronyn, Hitchcock’s decision to adapt the long-take approach to his Australian drama was ‘a mistake and got him into trouble’ (ibid). Of course, Cronyn was talking more broadly about the relative merits of the two films, but his remarks also reveal something about the film’s treatment of Australia. For Cronyn, the insistence on long takes limits one to the miniature, to the contained, and makes wrestling with this ‘enormous landscape’ almost impossible. Formally, then, the film’s dominant style requires a human drama, and a focus on character, above and beyond the landscape (and outdoor action) for which Australia has so often been cinematically exploited.

**Visualising Australia**

In terms of narrational alignment, the film’s preference for character over landscape also raises questions of perspective, and of whose vision of Australia we are given in *Under Capricorn*. By ignoring the Governor (and colonial authority) in that opening scene, we are invited to identify specifically with the character of Charles Adare, and his role as outsider and colonial fortune-seeker. Robin Wood has argued that ‘He, like us, is a stranger trying to understand an unfamiliar culture; we learn with him about Australian society and its customs’ (2002, 328). Leaving aside those for whom this culture is not necessarily ‘unfamiliar’, however, there remains significant doubt as to whether we do actually learn anything, at all, about Australian society or Australian customs in the film that follows. This ‘unfamiliarity’ might then be linked to an overall disinterest in Australia as a subject, and this might extend further to a consideration of the kinds of perspectives offered by the film’s very limited use of exteriors, and its relative inability to account for the ‘enormous landscapes’ noted by Cronyn.
There were, of course, numerous reference points available to Hitchcock and his production team in considering the landscapes around colonial Sydney, or colonial landscapes more broadly, not least the library of colonial artworks made in the decades either side of the film’s 1830s setting. Paintings like *A Direct North General View of Sydney Cove* (1794) based on a sketch by Thomas Watling, and Eugene Von Guérard’s *Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat* (1854) offer carefully composed and neatly framed visions of colonial splendor.

Watling and his early colonial contemporaries worked in the British landscape tradition to emphasise colonial endurance and survival, rather than revel in newfound lands (Radford 2013, 92). Arriving in the 1850s, Von Guérard imbued his more Arcadian landscapes with symbolism and
melancholy, thus becoming colonial Australia’s foremost exponent of the German Romantic tradition (ibid, 98). Occupying a space somewhere between those two traditions, the exteriors of *Under Capricorn* – themselves ‘more-than-usually-obvious’ matte paintings (Whitty 2016, 475) – are similarly composed and framed, offering up a colonial landscape that is ordered, and ‘knowable’, but which often retain more than a tinge of melancholy. Rather than capturing natural landscapes, however, all of these exteriors feature key colonial buildings, once again maintaining that focus on character and ‘civilisation’. The most notable, perhaps, is the Flusky homestead at Minyago Yugilla, which itself provides the locus of the film’s own symbolism and melancholy.

Steven Jacobs notes the resemblance of these matte paintings to the work of 17th century artist Claude, whereby the pictorial light effects not only serve to mask their artificiality, but also contribute to the house’s blend of exotic and uncanny (2007, 252). It seems entirely apt, then, that similar visions have seeped into the house itself, with a brooding, Claudean or Von Guérard-esque landscape overseeing several key dramatic moments in Minyago Yugilla’s drawing room.
Equally reminiscent of the work of Welsh artist Richard Wilson, whose mid-18th century work saw him dubbed ‘the father of British landscape painting’ (Solkin 1982, 7), this image is similarly framed, offering an ordered landscape, with man at the centre of all things. A vision of colonial splendor in the hands of Von Guérard, thus doubles – via Wilson – as a reminder of the old world that the Flusky’s (and, by extension, all settlers) have left behind.

Indeed, one of the later criticisms of colonial artists like Von Guérard and Watling is that they offered a very ‘European’ image of Australia, one that was entirely shaped by a particular vision of the English idyll and / or wider trends in European romanticism. A similar criticism might be leveled at Under Capricorn itself, with its inability to offer an ‘authentic’ vision of Australia tied, in no small part, to its offer of a distinctly distant version of Australia, albeit from the dual perspectives of Britain and Hollywood. As highlighted earlier, that fundamental disinterest in the Australian landscape places Under Capricorn in stark contrast to Ealing’s contemporaneous efforts to capture Australia on film. With Harry Watt at the helm, the initial phase of Ealing’s Australian project was understandably rooted in documentary approaches to narrative – both on-screen and off. The physicality of Watt’s research – and his insistence on ‘getting a sense’ of the country before shooting there – fundamentally shapes Ealing’s Australian productions. And his research extended to a survey of the visual repertoire of Australian images, most notably painting, in order to bring added verisimilitude to his renditions of the Australian past, both recent and colonial.

Unsurprisingly, whilst Under Capricorn seemed particularly inspired by the romantic, mid-colonial art that was very much in keeping with its temporal setting, Watt’s main touchstone were artists working either side of Australia’s Federation in 1901. Unlike their early and mid colonial counterparts, this first generation of Australian-trained artists were celebrated for their ability to accurately capture the particular Australian light, and for their contributions to a growing sense of Australian nationalism (Speck 2019, 310). Making their mark alongside writers and poets, at a moment of high cultural nationalism, they were able to capture Australian landscapes in a manner that conveyed its danger and harsh beauty. Drawing on such imagery, it is equally unsurprising perhaps, that Ealing’s Australian films might reflect similar visions of emergent nationhood in the face of natural adversity. This occurs most coherently in their first Australian production, The Overlanders, which met with significant success in Australia and beyond, and heralded a renewed interest, from both British and American quarters, in putting Australia on the big screen.
Competing colonial visions

Ealing’s second Australian production, however, was a slightly different story. A costume drama set on the colonial goldfields, *Eureka Stockade* offers an indicative counterpoint on the relative merits of shooting on location in this period, and provides an interesting parallel to *Under Capricorn*. As with each of the initial trio of Ealing’s Australian productions, *Eureka Stockade* is particularly interested in depictions of nation building in this White Dominion. Set against the backdrop of that 1850s goldfields rebellion, it focuses on a diverse cohort of new and old Australians banding together to fight against mining licenses, which are viewed as a form of taxation without representation.

Like *Under Capricorn*, *Eureka Stockade* opens with a voiceover that sets a historical context for the drama to follow. Grander, and altogether more pompous, it actively establishes a narrative with a much clearer investment in that ‘great dominion’ that is invoked (and then abandoned) at the start of *Under Capricorn*. Appearing before the opening credits, it makes a clear effort to cement Australian history within the broader context of liberal democracy:

*The story of the world is the story of man's fight for freedom. In that fight England had her Magna Carta, France her Revolution, America her Declaration of Independence, and Australia...Eureka Stockade!*

Following the opening credits, that rhetoric is matched by an equally sweeping opening sequence, which depicts (white) Australians racing from all quarters to find their fortunes on the goldfields.
Ostensibly there to provoke the kind of colonial authority so clearly lacking in *Under Capricorn*, this opening montage also demonstrates a clear interest in landscape as an important locus of the supposedly egalitarian formulation of Australia’s burgeoning nationhood.

Unlike Hitchcock’s vision of Australia ‘in miniature’, reliant on mattes and studio sets, Watt’s Australia makes copious use of locations and landscape. Not only does this provide a sense of physical scope that is entirely absent from *Under Capricorn*, but it frames it within a much more deliberate sense of a nation in formation, with a narrative that is driven by that formation as a collective act.

Whilst *Eureka Stockade* offers a collective vision of Australia, *Under Capricorn* is entirely focused on individuals, and it is within this tension that we might also begin to unpick the gendered nature of these contrasting colonial narratives. Both films are, to some extent, about the kinds of men needed to build a settler nation, but whilst Watt’s *Eureka Stockade* displays an almost singular obsession with that idea, it merely serves as colourful background in the case of Hitchcock’s film. *Eureka Stockade* focuses on its men as prospective citizens of a vaguely socialist, white settler utopia, with the many Chinese diggers conspicuous by their absence. In doing so, it taps into dominant cultural conceptions of the Anglo-Celtic ‘bushman’ as a key pioneer of Australia’s national mythology (Ward 1958). In contrast, *Under Capricorn* is consistently glancing backwards, dwelling on personal histories in spite of repeated warnings that, in the colonies, ‘a man’s past is his own business’.

The past lives of the two central male figures in *Under Capricorn* – Sam Flusky and Charles Adare – are intimately entangled with the life of Lady Henrietta Flusky. As such, their role as ‘pioneering men’ is circumscribed by the film’s melodramatic framework, which is built entirely around Bergman’s star performance. Narratives of the colonial frontier – of which *The Overlanders* and *Eureka Stockade* are prime examples – are typically coded, especially in British cinema, via a highly masculine engagement with open spaces and realist adventure. By contrast, *Under Capricorn*’s enclosed, melodramatic approach to colonial life marks its domestic interiors out as as wholly feminine, with open space existing only in abstract. In *Eureka Stockade*, that general focus on the masculine process of ‘nation building’, is brought into sharp relief by the addition of a romantic subplot. Contemporary critics were particularly scathing about this aspect of the film, partly due to Watt’s perceived inability to handle human drama, but also because it was deemed unconvincing (Morgan 2017, 152). Implicit in this, however, is a criticism of melodrama (and the feminine) as an unacceptable imposition upon narratives of the masculine frontier. In this sense, where Ealing’s Australian films were bound up in an older vision of the (settler) colonial frontier,
*Under Capricorn* aligns more closely with the feminised cinematic versions of Empire that become more prevalent in its precise moment of post-war crisis (Webster 2003, 88). As a successful settler colony, however, Australia was entirely free from the rigours and trials of decolonisation, or even any genuine effort to reckon with its ongoing imperial realities, thus leaving *Under Capricorn*’s particular version of white femininity unshackled by the ‘inconvenience’ of dealing with the colonial other.

**Imperial melodrama**

Most post-war cinematic visions of Australia are likewise content to ignore First Nations populations. Even when Indigenous people do figure, they are always a ‘problem’ to be overcome by (white) nationhood, as the successful final stage of British settler colonialism. An useful counterpoint to both *Eureka Stockade*’s white settler masculinity and *Under Capricorn*’s white settler femininity, is provided by *Jedda* (1955), the final feature by Australia’s most significant mid-century filmmakers, Charles and Elsa Chauvel. *Jedda* is a ‘bastardised melodrama’ about an Aboriginal girl (Rosalie Kunoth-Monks), who is adopted by a white woman (Betty Suttor) in Central Australia, and grows up expecting to marry a respectable, mixed-race stockman (Paul Reynall), but who is lured away by a ‘primitive’, full-blooded ‘savage’ named Marbuk (Robert Tudawali) (Mills 2012, 13). Echoing the dominant framework of Indigenous-settler engagement in mid-century Australia – itself in the process of shifting from ‘protection’ to ‘assimilation’, but inflected by the ongoing, forced removal of Aboriginal children (see Rowse 1998) – the film narrativises the white feminine ideal specifically through its contrasting of ‘safe’ domestic interiors, and the ‘savage’ dangers of the open spaces beyond.

Like *Under Capricorn*, *Jedda* makes extensive use of mattes and painted backdrops, although these are interspersed with scenes shot on location. *Jedda* also opens with a map of Australia, with necessary background context provided via an introductory voiceover by Joe, the half-caste cattle man and Jedda’s prospective suitor. A contemporary narrative, set a century or so after *Under Capricorn*, *Jedda*’s map necessarily conveys some knowledge of the continent’s interior, and more fully represents that ‘territorial version of nationhood’ and the dictation of ‘colonial discourses’, as noted by Morrison (2004, 200). There remains, however, a constant tension between the film’s ‘authenticity’, and it’s melodramatic mode of address. As Stuart Cunningham has argued, the unique approach to high melodrama taken in the Chauvel films is actually borne of nationalist / realist impulses, including their insistence on ‘locationism’ via ‘authentic’ location shoots. This nationalist / realist framework is subsequently ‘redeployed and assumed into the
melodramatic “vision” of nationality which is the the generating mechanism of the films’ (1986, 47) [emphasis his]. This is certainly the case in *Jedda*, where the strict delineation between civilised / white and savage / black lives (and bodies) reaches an emotional apex that is framed in explicitly melodramatic terms.

In one key moment, a teenage Jedda – who grew up consistently drawn to her ‘black’ side – gazes longingly from a window thinking about her tribal relatives, who are ‘free’ to wander the landscape ‘on Walkabout’. Her adoptive mother, however, is on hand to talk her out of the ‘primitive’ urge to join them, echoing her consistent efforts to ‘domesticise’ Jedda’s blackness, and educate her in the ways of the ‘civilised’ white woman. Insisting that she ‘go on living like a white girl, like my own daughter’, the mother attempts to break Jedda free from such thinking by reminding her that it is time for her music lesson. Seated at the piano, however, Jedda’s calm recital of a European classical work is quickly overcome by the ‘primitive call’ of her people. In a flurry of dischordant notes and rapid editing that cross cuts between Jedda’s face and the Aboriginal shields that adorn the wall above the piano, this moment offers precisely the kind of emotional excess that we tend to associate with the melodramatic form (Walsh 2005, 56). At the same time, it encapsulates the film’s consistent concern with the ‘return of the repressed’, a familiar trope from both melodramas and Hitchcock.
Erasures and absences

Whilst Jedda is unable to suppress (or escape) her ‘savage’ past, the film’s melodramatic impulse is also contingent on the existence of forbidden relationships, something that is set in tragic motion when she meets the ‘wild black’, Marbuk. This intersection of the return of the repressed and forbidden relationships is also central to Under Capricorn, which is likewise framed not only by the tryst between Adare and Henrietta, but by Hitchcock’s use of ‘savage’ iconography as a tool of horror and abjection. Henrietta’s dipsomania is aggravated, in part, by the mysterious presence of ‘shrunken heads’. They appear in her bedroom at opportune moments, having been gratuitously introduced to the audience earlier via one of the film’s very few single-shot close-ups. Although their narrative convenience is sufficiently explained later in the film, their precise origin, and their existence as imperialist trophies, is consistently obscured, and never explained.

These colonial artefacts – which exist not only as a key visual motif both within the film, but also figure in some of its marketing – are not a cinematic contrivance, although their presence did cause some confusion among critics. In Simpson’s novel their provenance lies with the Māori of New Zealand (1938, 70), but without adequate explanation, their presence in the film often wrongly attributed to Australia’s own Indigenous population. A review in Variety, for example, notes their presence as emblematic of the film’s lacklustre pace, claiming that ‘Hitchcock plants [the] fact that Australian aborigines shrink the heads of their victims. One hundred minutes later he uses a mummified head as the single shocker in the footage’ (Brogdon 1949, 8). Like Marbuk’s ‘wild savagery’ in Jedda, these shrunken heads function as a reminder of colonial peril, and of the supposed depravity of pre-colonial societies.

If we take their provenance as Aotearoa / New Zealand, however, these ‘shrunken heads’ (or mokomokai) are not the result of savagery, but an integral aspect of cultural preservation within Māori society. The tattooed (moko) heads of chiefs, rangatira (esteemed people) and whānau (family) members were dried and smoked to preserve them from decay, and retained by families as personal remembrances of the dead, and important tools in rituals of both war and peace (Palmer & Tano 2004, 3). Devoid of cultural context in both the novel and the film, where they lack the distinctive tattoos, they are instead rendered gruesome symbols of cross-imperial trade. The first European to obtain a mokomokai was Joseph Banks, naturalist on Cook’s first voyage, just months before he claimed possession of the east coast of Australia. The earliest record of mokomokai being traded in Sydney is 1811, and by the 1820s the trade in these tattooed heads was so common that they had their own entry, as ‘baked heads’, in the customs books (ibid, 4). During New Zealand’s Musket Wars (1807-1837), trade in mokomokai increased dramatically, with the heads of defeated
enemies traded for muskets, and slaves often given fake moko (tattoos) and killed for the same purpose. Trade in mokomokai also increased in the early 17th century due to the colonial collection of human remains for both scientific and decorative purposes, with significant demand driven by European museums and private collectors (where many examples remain to this day). Needless to say, this rapid commercialisation had the combined effect of denigrating moko and desacralising mokomokai, and destroying their aesthetic and cultural value in the process, a significant trend aligned with western demands on Indigenous art and culture across the world (ibid, 5).

In Sydney, the trade in mokomokai was prohibited in early 1831, shortly before the arrival of Governor Pierce, as depicted at the beginning of Hitchcock’s film version of Under Capricorn. The illicit trade that followed is merely hinted at in the film, where they are used by the Flusky’s jealous housekeeper Milly (Margaret Leighton), in order to keep Lady Henrietta under control, and in the hope of winning the affections of her husband. In Simpson’s novel, however, it is Flusky himself who collects the gruesome trophies, showing them off to an exasperated Adare, and telling him ‘it does them no harm, the blacks. They’re dead enough’ (Simpson 1938, 70). Although they contribute to Henrietta’s distress in the novel, their presence is largely benign. In the hands of the film’s Milly, however, they become an active tool of torment, and one that – devoid of context – implies an aspect of colonial guilt, not least when considering their use by an ostensibly English housekeeper to keep an Irish woman ‘in line’.

The biggest questions about Indigenous cultures and colonial guilt in Hitchcock’s rendition of Under Capricorn come not from its presences, but from its absences. Rendered, problematically, on the margins of colonial life in Simpson’s novel, Aboriginal characters are completely absent from the film. In contrasting the two texts, Constantine Verevis highlights a number of key alterations and excisions, including a sub-plot in the novel detailing Adare’s journey into the interior in search of gold, accompanied by ‘Ketch’, an Aboriginal man he meets near the Flusky household and hires as a guide (2011, 176). As Verevis notes, such depictions contribute to the novel’s ‘colourful engagement with antipodean attitudes (and issues of colonialism and race)’, and their removal has the effect of ‘emptying Hitchcock’s film of much of the book’s local specificity’ (ibid). Whether this is an issue of not going on location is debatable. After all, in the novel, Simpson can afford to complicate matters by addressing – however problematically – the Indigenous presence. The film, in keeping with its depiction of civilization on ‘the edge of unknown land’, offers up Australia as a blank canvas, much in keeping with settler colonialism itself. For all the historical records and narratives about frontier conflict – of which, in the context of post-war cinema, Ealing’s third Australian production Bitter Springs (Ralph Smart, 1950) is a notable exception – the
overwhelming depiction of Australia is that of a ‘white colony’ of the British Empire, transformed into a ‘white Dominion’, and – eventually – a key ‘white nation’ within the Commonwealth. Indeed, the lack of Indigenous presence is significant precisely because settler colonies (and nations) like Australia are entirely predicated on such erasures. A truly successful settler colony is one that has removed all trace of Indigenous inhabitants, and as cultural texts, films are part and parcel of that process.

Furthermore, the fact that settler societies are predicated on the dispossession of Indigenous lands is no coincidence when it comes to the acquisition of property and the allocation of ‘crown lands’, which serve as key plot points in Under Capricorn. In this light, the film’s recurring social motif of ‘not talking about the past’ – so often read in terms of class and criminality, and as a comment on Australia’s egalitarian ideals – takes on an unwitting resonance. Although its First Nations people have long carried cultural memories of dispossession, massacre and maltreatment, Australia more broadly has consistently struggled to reconcile this past within conceptions of the contemporary nation and narratives of nationhood. So whilst it may be possible to talk about ‘original sin’ in Under Capricorn in terms of the Magdalen-esque nature of Hattie’s suffering and penitence (Gallefant 2005, 70) or in the rigid system of social status that overshadows the protagonists (Allen 2019, 123), the colonial setting itself also has a significant role to play. In accounting for the film’s final scene, a return to the dockside setting of the opening as Adare departs back to the ‘Old World’, Richard Allen posits that the Flusky’s are ‘finally liberated from original sin, that is, from the accumulated prejudices of the class system of the Old World, to embrace a future in which the love between two human beings is freely entered into and universally honored’ (ibid, 127). And yet they do so, in the context of the film’s setting, on the unceded land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and standing beneath the British flag. In this sense, the true ‘original sin’ of Under Capricorn, and of the society it depicts, might actually be settler colonialism itself.
Conclusion
As with any ‘minor’ Hitchcock, Under Capricorn is rarely allowed to stand on its own merits – a fact that this collection of essays, and the Under Capricorn at 70 symposium from which they emerged – has hopefully gone some way to rectifying. For many Hitchcock scholars, and for Hitchcock himself, the film’s setting seems almost irrelevant, and it is typically positioned as a mid-career experiment, in terms of both the Transatlantic Pictures partnership, and the extended long take. In other accounts, it is held up as an example of Hitchcockian high melodrama and/or as a star vehicle for Ingrid Bergman, or an example of gothic romance. This is not to say that the fault necessarily lies with Hitchcock scholarship. Indeed, I would argue that the neglected fact of its Australian setting lies squarely with the film itself.

Hitchcock’s struggle to depict an ‘authentic’ vision of colonial Australia in Under Capricorn may, after all, be just another contributor to its overall ‘failure’ for audiences, past and present. Amidst the litany of regrets that he shares with Truffaut regarding Under Capricorn, it is telling, I think, that none of them involve his decision not to shoot on location in Australia. A troubled, uneven production from the outset, Robin Wood has argued that ‘the particular richness of Under Capricorn derives partly from the multiplicity of its influences, determinants, and anticipations’ (2002, 326). As recent interest in the film has shown, even if not always successful, it is undeniably rich. And of those multiplicities of riches, it’s unique, often problematic, representation of Australia is but one that I think bears closer scrutiny.

WORKS CITED
(Consulted: 17 August 2020).


Jones, Lon (1946a) ‘British To Make Film in California’, Sydney Morning Herald, 11 June, 11.


**COPYRIGHT CITATIONS**

After Thomas Watling, *A direct north general view of Sydney Cove ... 1794*  
oil on canvas, 91 x 121 cm  
Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales [DG 60]. (Out of Copyright)

Eugene von Guérard, *Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat 1854*  
oil on canvas on plywood, 46.0 x 75.5 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased, 1977  
Photo: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (Out of Copyright)
Dr Stephen Morgan has taught at various institutions, including King’s College London, Queen Mary University of London, University of Greenwich and University of Winchester. His current research focuses on transnational British cinema in the settler colonial context, specifically the ‘White Dominions’ of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. He is co-editor of the forthcoming book *Screening Australia: Culture, Media, Context* (Peter Lang, 2021), and serves as Screening Coordinator for the Menzies Australia Institute (KCL) and as Co-Programmer of the London Australian Film Society and Festival.

**IMAGE CAPTIONS**

Figure 1 – *An introductory map sets up the contrast between known and unknown.*

Figure 2 – Under Capricorn: *Sydney is established in the opening sequence*

Figure 3 – *Remarkable similarities between the Sydney of Under Capricorn, and the Chicago of Calamity Jane*

Figure 4 – *After Thomas Watling, A direct north general view of Sydney Cove ... 1794 (State Library of New South Wales)*

Figure 5 – *Eugene von Guérard, Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat 1854 (National Gallery of Victoria)*

Figure 6 – *Matte paintings of the Flusky home at Minyago Yugilla, order with a tinge of melancholy.*

Figure 7 – *A romantic landscape adorns the Drawing Room of the Flusky home.*

Figure 8 – *Landscape and nationhood are intimately linked in the opening montage of Eureka Stockade*

Figure 9 – *Jedda: A flurry of discordant notes and rapid editing creates a moment of emotional excess for Jedda (Rosalie Kunoth Monks)*

Figure 10 – Under Capricorn: *Sam Flusky (Joseph Cotton) and Lady Henrietta (Ingrid Bergman) farewell Charles Adare (Michael Wilding) beneath the British flag.*