

# **‘Every Right to be There’: Cinema Spaces and Racial Politics in Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia***

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During Baz Luhrmann’s childhood in a small country town in New South Wales in the 1960s and 1970s, his father operated the local picture theatre. It’s a detail much mentioned by Luhrmann in interviews, and often included in biographical sketches of him. His *Wikipedia* entry, for instance, notes that: ‘He was raised in Herons Creek, a tiny rural settlement in northern New South Wales, where his father ran a petrol station and a movie theatre, both of which would influence his son’s film-making’ (‘Baz’). An interview with Luhrmann that appears on various fan websites likewise states: ‘Mark Anthony Luhrmann grew up in rural Australia and it was at his father’s movie theatre that he first became enthralled by the world of movies and the power of story telling’ (Fischer). Film theorist Pam Cook says that Luhrmann ‘delights in ... telling his own life story, which he views as inseparable from his creative journey’ (14). As part of that story, Luhrmann credits his father’s cinema with exposing him to the old movies and musicals that would become inspiration for, and sources in, his own films. For instance, when explaining influences for *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann told one interviewer that:

I grew up in the middle of nowhere and we got lots of old television and my dad ran a cinema for a while, so I loved musicals as a kid. You know, music cinema, all this artificiality making you feel things, I’ve done a lot of opera and theater, and I just thought that somebody’s got to get around to making that work in the cinema again. And so that was the project. (Keefe)

That Luhrmann’s film-making owes a debt to a childhood spent watching old movies in a country cinema is evident in what Meaghan Morris calls the ‘archivism’ of his oeuvre, by which she means its constant referencing of film history. It is also reflected in the ways in which he stages his films to make his audience conscious they are in or entering into a cinematic or theatrical space. This characteristic has been noted in respect to the films that make up the Red Curtain Trilogy: *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001). Describing this impulse in the making of *Strictly Ballroom*, Luhrmann explained that he and his co-writer Craig Pearce

thought, let's look back to a cinematic language where the audience participated in the form. Where they were aware at all times that they were watching a movie, and that they should be active in their experience and not passive. Not being put into a sort of sleep state and made to believe through a set of constructs that they are watching a real-life story through a keyhole. They are aware at all times that they are watching a movie. (Andrew)

Being made aware that you are watching a movie is a device also used in *Australia*, but for different ends. It is part of a repertoire for engaging audiences with Australia's racial history that is so central to the film. In *Australia*, Luhrmann not only makes his audience aware that they are watching a movie; he makes them aware that were they watching a movie in 1930s and 1940s Darwin, the time and place in which *Australia* is set (or indeed in any other Australian town in the same period), they would likely be watching it in a racially segregated cinema. So, in *Australia* Luhrmann works with, as well as contributes to, a more expansive notion of cinema history than previously. In addition to his trademark references to earlier films and film genres, in *Australia* he also registers aspects of the social history of cinema, including audiences and exhibition sites. Within the context of the film he presents the local picture theatre in Darwin as one site, among others such as the pub, as constituting part of what Denis Byrne has called the 'nervous landscape' of a racially segregated society. 'The nervous system of racialized space', Byrne writes, '... has to do with the question of how close people are allowed to get to each other' (17). The complex, contradictory and petty ways in which bodily proximity is policed between races (and indeed between classes and genders) is established early on, when in the opening scene in Darwin the Drover's offsider and brother-in-law Magarri is barred from the local hotel. The local picture theatre is portrayed later in the film as part of this 'nervous landscape', but the politics of race and space are worked out differently within it.

By engaging with this aspect of Australian cinema-going, Luhrmann addresses a theme that is somewhat muted in Australian film studies, even though it is well covered in Aboriginal history scholarship (see, for example, Curthoys; Goodall), and is pronounced in Aboriginal people's personal and collective memories (Lowe; Flick and Goodall; Byrne and Nugent). In general terms, as Kate Bowles argues, there has been relatively little attention given in Australian cinema studies to 'the social meaning of cinema-going', and she singles out racial segregation in cinemas as one notable blind spot (Bowles 254, 255; see also Tomsic). In the place of social, including racial, histories of cinema-going, emphasis continues to be given to film production and distribution, and to analyses of particular films, directors, schools and periods. In terms of Aboriginal themes and issues, the focus has been on representations of Aboriginal people

in Australian film, or their participation in the Australian film industry, or the careers of particular Aboriginal actors and directors, much more so than the experiences of Aboriginal people as cinema-goers and as cinema-consumers (but see Robinson; see also Collins and Davis; Langton).

This is not to say that the phenomenon of segregated cinemas has been completely ignored in Australian film studies. It is often mentioned in passing in histories of Australian cinema or popular culture, but rarely examined in detail (see Collins; Arrow). This is in contrast with North American scholarship, in which, as Kate Bowles notes, 'researchers ... have begun the work of describing and reflecting upon the cultural impact of the racially segregated picture theatre' (Bowles 255). This includes detailed local studies of particular cinemas, as well as more general histories of racial segregation within the film industry and in exhibition sites (Waller; Stewart; Abel). Bowles calls for similarly detailed studies in Australia. Not only would such studies contribute to greater understanding of race relations and the social and cultural effects of practices of segregation; they would also, Bowles suggests, have something important to offer international scholarship. In her view:

Australian research presents a complementary witness demonstrating the social performativity of segregation in Australia was different in matters of means and purpose and at the level of architectural assumption about high status or low status seating. The segregated Australian picture theatre was not simply a derivation of an American cultural instrument, but developed out of pre-existing local practices, enabling Australian communities to transfer the means of socially mixing from one venue to another. (Bowles 255)

Yet, there are real challenges involved in writing social histories of segregated cinema-going in Australia. Nancy Huggett's work on this theme in rural New South Wales indicates that non-Aboriginal people often have difficulty recalling racial segregation, or that their explanations of it are not only contrary to Aboriginal people's remembrances but also different from those of other non-Aboriginal people in the same audiences. In some early oral history interviews Huggett conducted in rural New South Wales, she found that when she introduced the topic of racial segregation in cinemas her interviewees typically responded in two ways. Some could not recall racial segregation at the country cinemas they attended; others could not remember seeing any Aboriginal people when they went to the movies. Huggett concluded that 'speaking of racial segregation at the cinema is difficult because there are so few public accounts available in which to situate personal experiences and because it is not a comfortable reminiscence topic for white audience members' (271). Others have noted the absence of racial segregation as a key theme in public histories of Australian cinemas. The archaeologist Denis Byrne, for instance,

has pointed out that a preoccupation in heritage studies on the architectural features and values of Australian picture theatres can serve to disguise the social meanings and memories of these 'sites', including for Aboriginal people. Other factors might be at play here, including, the practices of segregation itself, that oftentimes aimed to minimise the visibility of Aboriginal patrons in the cinemas they shared with whites.

Experiences of being partitioned off within local cinemas occupy a prominent place in Aboriginal people's remembrances: in autobiographies and memoirs and in oral histories. Aboriginal people's memories and accounts of attending the cinema in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s invariably focus on what it was like to be segregated away from white patrons, and confined to the worst seats in the house. They include vivid accounts of the humiliation felt when they were forced to enter and leave by side doors, to take their seats after the lights went down, and to leave before the lights went up. That this is an experience that Luhrmann engages with in *Australia* is a product, perhaps, of the ways in which, 'a substantial part of the initial research [for the film] was devoted to talking to people in various indigenous communities about their different histories and cultures', as Pam Cook notes (116). Little acknowledged in the critical response to Luhrmann's film is the fact that his sources were as much Aboriginal people's personal accounts as Xavier Herbert's novels or earlier Australian films, like *Jedda* (Conor; Kevin).

If Marcia Langton's response to the film is any measure, then Luhrmann seems to have succeeded in capturing in recognisable ways Aboriginal people's experiences of watching movies in segregated cinemas in rural Australia. In her celebratory review of the film in the *Age*, Langton wrote:

In his imagined cinema of the 1940s, the spatial and social shape of racism is reconstructed with such exact detail, I felt I had been transported back to my own childhood. His white townsfolk are in their designated whites-only seats in back rows under the roof and the Aboriginal and Chinese members of the audience are in the front rows under the open sky, and I found my eye drawn to the location of my own seat on a bench in the cinema of my childhood in western Queensland.

Literary theorist Ken Gelder has noted the productive paradox in Langton's reception of the film (6-7). Langton was among the first to acknowledge *Australia's* fantastical qualities, and indeed to appreciate the ways in which the film veered away from historical realism in order to provide an alternative origin myth of the nation. And, yet, the film itself contains such faithfully realised scenes and images ('with such exact detail'), such as the segregated cinema audience, that it draws Langton so intimately back to her own lived experience that she searches for her own seat.

This contrasts with the response that Germaine Greer had to the film, in which she bemoaned its lack of historical realism and accuracy. In reply to Langton's review of *Australia*, Greer focused on what she considered was the almost total absence of historical accuracy when it came to portraying Aboriginal people's experiences and the material conditions under which they lived. Much subsequent discussion has likewise focused on the film's historical inaccuracies, or has criticised Luhrmann's questionable uses of historical details in the service of romance and epic, or of liberal white myth (see Hogan; Levine).

It is worth noting that in her criticism of the film, and in her responses to Langton, Germaine Greer remained silent on the scene in the segregated cinema, even though this was *the* experience that Langton had recognised so strongly from her own Aboriginal childhood in rural Australia and had singled out in her initial review. Perhaps Greer was prepared to concede that Luhrmann had achieved some accuracy, or at the least truthfulness, on this score. In a throwaway line, made without much context, she claimed: 'The only history Luhrmann seems to care about is the history of the movies' (Greer).

In caring about the history of the movies, Luhrmann has not shied away from engaging with racialised aspects of cinema-going in mid-twentieth century Australia. While not historically accurate on all counts, he nevertheless has portrayed the segregated cinema with a certain verisimilitude. To some extent this is because Luhrmann and his team, especially Catherine Martin, Bazmark's production designer, are faithful to their main 'historical sources', which in this case are Aboriginal people's memories on the one hand, and historical photographs of Australian cinemas and cinema audiences on the other. In the discussion that follows, my aim is to explore in some depth the ways in which *Australia* animates these 'historical archives'. In my discussion, I am influenced by Laleen Jayamanne's approach to 'reading' *Australia*, in which she draws attention to the 'richness of the systems of signs' it emits, as well as to the ways in which the film 'frees itself from the obligation to mirror history with the accuracy of a realist aesthetic' even as it 'situates itself in culturally, racially and sexually miscegenated, multicultural milieux' that made up mid-twentieth century Australia. Jayamanne argues that what matters in *Australia* is the attention to detail in the film's 'aesthetic optic because Bazmark's historical impulse in its embryonic force seems to nestle there and germinate' (134). The historical force that nestles and germinates in the details of the local cinema portrayed in *Australia* is the focus of the discussion below.

## I. Knowing your place: the racialised space of Australian cinemas

The idea that *Australia* will be a cinematic experience, in which the viewer is made aware they are watching a film, is seeded even before the film itself begins. Immediately after the promos of the film's two production companies an illustration of the exterior of a building called the Pearl Picture Garden appears on the screen. The illustration is in the vein of a model set design, or an architectural drawing. Like the vernacular architecture of Australian picture theatres of the 1930s, the Pearl Picture Garden's façade is timber, and it incorporates some art deco style flourishes, such as a carved pearl shell design at the apex. The façade hides the corrugated iron sides of the building, and disguises the fact that most of the building has no roof. It's a carefully detailed illustration.

In this opening sequence, the Pearl Picture Garden's art deco doors, flanked by a couple of kangaroo manikins, swing open. The audience is transported swiftly across the foyer, and through the heavy curtained entrance, into the rudimentary cinema. The set design cinema is empty of patrons, but the illustration of the interior displays *in a flash* three distinct types of seating. The best seats in the house are at the rear of the cinema. They are cane planter-style chairs, arranged on a raised platform, and completely under cover of the cinema's roofed section. The second tier of seating is rows of canvas bleachers, some of which are under cover, others in the open. The third section is closest to the cinema screen, and is made up of rows of backless wooden benches. These are completely exposed to the sky, and are flat to the ground on a plane with the theatre's stage. This is back-aching and neck-cranning territory.

This brief animated prologue—a fleeting sign lasting only fifteen seconds—ends with the title sequence for *Australia* projected onto the screen of the cut out cardboard model cinema. The film's title is written in capitals over a map of Australia. This is where we are, it appears to announce, and its story will be told from the vantage point of this cinema in the heart of 1930s and 1940s Darwin. So, even before the movie begins, Luhrmann has put his contemporary audience for *Australia* in the picture, or in the picture theatre, at least. He has not only made them conscious that this is a movie they are about to watch. He has also begun to introduce the idea that the activity of watching movies in this place called *Australia* has its own particular history, in which not all viewing positions are the same, and the comfort of theatre patrons not evenly distributed. The stratified nature of Australian cinemas, and the carefully choreographed spatial arrangement of audiences within them, is a theme that Luhrmann will return to later in a couple of scenes set at the Pearl Picture Gardens. For now, however,

he simply uses the aesthetic device of drawing, and thus drawing attention to, the material features of the interior of a 1930s Australian picture theatre, one in which distinct types of seating of varying quality and comfort could be found.

This opening sequence functions as one of the film's 'fleeting and inventive signs' (Jayamanne 132). To some extent, the illustration of the cinema's interior provokes a 'double take'. On first glance, the Pearl Picture Garden looks like any mid-twentieth Australian picture theatre building in any Australian country town. But the precise portrayal of its stratified seating unsettles any sense of easy familiarity. Here Luhrmann in some sense invites his viewers to take their seats, and in so doing the question of who sits where and why hangs in the air.

It is telling that the theme of social and racial stratification, a theme that is pronounced throughout the film, should be presented initially in the guise of a set design. The production design of Luhrmann's films, created by his partner and collaborator Catherine Martin and her team, is a hallmark of the Bazmark approach to cinematic storytelling (P. Cook; Jayamanne). As set design, though, this historical theme is only sketched in outline. The audience might note the tiers of seating illustrated, but there is nothing explicit in this animated sequence to suggest the function that different seating played in managing social relations among cinema audiences. Indeed, as Denis Byrne has argued, this built fabric does not 'proclaim its identity or significance' (185). Discussing this in relation to a picture theatre in Taree, a town not far from Luhrmann's hometown of Herons Creek, Byrne suggests that: 'The traces of what happened there are largely memory traces. When the Aboriginal people of the Manning Valley talk today about the old cinema, they speak not of architecture but of humiliation and anger' (186).

And yet, Aboriginal people in the Manning Valley, as elsewhere, *do* speak of the architecture of Australian cinemas. In ways that resonate with the preliminary set design sequence in *Australia*, their memories often attach to the inferior quality of the seats they were required to sit upon compared with those reserved for white patrons. Recently, the National Museum of Australia staged a temporary exhibition called *From Little Things Big Things Grow* in its Gallery of First Australians. Focusing on the period from 1920 to 1970, and 'the fight for Indigenous civil rights in Australia from 1920 to 1970', the exhibition had at its centre some cinema seats rescued from the Bowraville Picture Theatre. Bowraville is a small town in northern New South Wales, another place not unlike Luhrmann's hometown of Herons Creek. Its local theatre, perhaps like Luhrmann's father's cinema, had two types of seating: wooden and plush. As was common in many country towns in New South Wales for much of the twentieth century, the proprietors of the Bowraville theatre 'managed' race relations by segregating Aboriginal patrons in the wooden seats in a roped off section at the front of the cinema. Martin Ballangarry, a local Aboriginal man, recalled of the

seats that: 'They were hard on your back, so as kids we would lie on the floor. We would all line up, sometimes 10, maybe 15 people, adults, kids; we were all lying down here' (Pickwick). An Aboriginal woman from Stradbroke Island in Queensland, recalling her movie-going experiences in the 1930s, explained: 'We Aborigines had to sit at the front while the white children used to sit at the back with their mummies and daddies in the comfy chairs' (cited in Robinson 60).

The cinema operating in Darwin from the late 1920s was the Star, and like the Bowraville cinema, it organised race relations by reserving different seats for different social groups. 'But although it brought many different social classes together', historian Charles Brister notes, 'the physical structure of the Star emphasised the social and racial boundaries' (41). In particular, the 'line between social classes was reflected in the seating arrangements' (37).

The theatre was sectioned off into three areas; upstairs on the balcony, downstairs underneath the balcony and the 'blacks', the area near the front of the screen that had no roof cover and a cement floor. The upstairs balcony tended to be reserved for the upper class members of Darwin society, such as senior public servants and local business figures. To those outside this class they were derisively known as 'silvertails'. The working class non-Aboriginal people tended to sit at the back of the theatre hall, beneath the balcony, while the 'blacks', as the name implies, became the area where the Aborigines were expected to sit. (37)<sup>1</sup>

The arrangement of bodies in the space of the cinema is a theme that will be returned to later in the film proper. For now, however, the audience has been shown to their seats. Before long, Luhrmann's movie camera will be trained on the local cinema audience, but as a prelude to that a conversation about the politics of cinemas and cinema-going takes place.

## II. Every right to be there? Invisibility, censorship, protest

The prelude to the main scene set in the local picture theatre in *Australia* is a conversation between the Aboriginal domestic servant, Bandy Legs (Lillian Crombie), the Chinese cook, Sing Song (Yuen Wah), and the 'half-caste' boy, Nullah (Brandon Walters). The setting for this exchange is their makeshift camp in Darwin, where they have arrived after the successful drive of cattle from Faraway Downs. While Lady Sarah Ashley, who is staying at the local hotel in

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1 Although The Star cinema in Darwin was racially segregated, it is not the model for the cinema in *Australia*. The Pearl Picture Garden is based on the Sun Picture Garden, the cinema operating in Broome, Western Australia, in the 1930s. See Cook, *Baz Luhrmann*.

town, prepares to attend a society ball as patron, Bandy Legs announces that she wants to be taken by Sing Song and Nullah 'on a big night at the pictures'. Sing Song responds by saying that 'you can't take half caste to picture show; coppers take him'. Bandy Legs replies with a touching and emotional speech, saying that: 'He got every right to be there. We use magic. He got every right to be there. Cos you're a special boy. He's a special boy. Nobody gonna stop you from going. Nobody'.

Although in this speech Bandy Legs insists that the cinema is an egalitarian space, from which no one can be excluded, she nonetheless does all she can to ensure that Nullah will not be seen at the movies. Her 'magic' is to blacken Nullah's face with charcoal from the fire to help make him 'invisible' so that he can avoid detection.

Two things are at play here. One is that the blackening of his face is used to minimise the threat of him being picked up by the police on the basis that he is a 'half-caste' or a 'creamy'. Government programs to remove children from their families in the Northern Territory in this period were aimed mainly at mixed race children and it was known for mothers or aunties to darken lighter skinned children so as to avoid notice by police, missionaries or government officials (see for example Cummings; Briscoe). The other is that a darkened face helped Nullah to effectively 'disappear', to become invisible, in the darkened space of the cinema. When we see him at the movies in the next scene, the camera has to search him out, following Bandy Legs backward glance to find him sitting alone up high outside the projectionist booth, face blackened, crunching on an apple.

This is an odd scene in the film, because it is not at all clear that Aboriginal people 'blackened up' to go to the cinema, although the practice of darkening fair coloured children's faces in a bid to avoid detection by police and government officials is not unknown. Yet, it seems all too obvious that Luhrmann is referencing a familiar element in a much broader cinema history, particularly the North American film industry, in which it was common practice for white actors to blacken up to play black characters (Collins). It is perhaps this flash of recognition that Luhrmann hopes to provoke in his North American audiences when they watch Nullah, black-faced, watching *The Wizard of Oz* flickering on the screen (P. Cook 137); while also gesturing towards the exposure of Australian audiences to North American racial culture through movies and other forms of popular entertainment.

Rather than Aboriginal people seeking to minimise their own visibility within picture theatres, this is instead remembered as something that picture theatre proprietors sought to achieve. Different entrances were used to shepherd Aboriginal people into the cinema in ways that prevented close contact with white audience members. In their personal accounts, the humiliation of being

only allowed to enter the cinema after the lights had gone down, and ushered out the side door before the lights came up, is often dwelt upon. Ella Simon from Taree recalled in her autobiography that: '[The Aboriginal people] used to be marched down [to the front] when the lights were dim, because the managements were ashamed to let their white customers see just how many black people they were letting in. If they could have completely stopped all Aboriginal people from going to the pictures at all, I believe they would have, you know' (Simon 181). On a return visit to the Bowraville Cinema with curators from the *National Museum of Australia*, Martin Ballengary showed them the side entrance that Aboriginal people were required to use and explained: 'We would walk down this side, then come around the back of the theatre. We weren't allowed in the front door' (Pickwick). Another Aboriginal man, Robert Lowe, recalling his experiences in the misnamed Liberty Theatre in his home town of Warrnambool in Victoria in the 1950s, noted: 'Even as I got older, about ten or eleven years old, I can remember going into Warrnambool to go to the pictures at the old Liberty Theatre (where Coles is now). You'd walk up to buy your ticket—we couldn't get served while anyone else was in the line, we had to wait till the line was finished—then they would serve you. And then you weren't allowed to go in the same door as everyone else, they took you down the side and put you in the side door' (Lowe 43-4). Russell Saunders, who like Ella Simon is from Taree, told me in an oral history interview, recorded in 2000, that:

The picture theatre was ... a case where you paid for the ticket, give them your money at the front office, then you walked around the side. And there was a doorway on either side. ... And when it was finished you went out the side door. Not out the door everybody else walked. And that was it. ... That was your pictures. Your money was good enough but your bodily presence wasn't. (Cited in Byrne and Nugent 95-6)

In Darwin, a further form of segregation was practised: some nights were allocated for whites only. In the 1930s and 1940s, Aboriginal people's attendance was at the discretion of the Chief Protector of Aborigines. Under provisions set out in ordinances, Aboriginal people residing in Darwin were subject to a night curfew, which required them to be out of the town common by dusk (Martínez). Exceptions were made on the nights the chief protector permitted Aboriginal people to attend to the movies. A notice was published in the local newspaper to inform Darwin residents which nights those were:

Now I ... Chief Protector of Aborigines for North Australia, do hereby grant permission for the said aboriginals employed as aforesaid in Darwin Centre to be within the prohibited area of Darwin after eight o'clock in the evening of the first day of ... and the fourth day of ...

until 30 minutes after eleven o'clock of those evenings on the occasions of the Moving Picture Exhibitions to be held at the Star Picture Theatre ... (Cook, 'Regulations')

This meant that there were certain nights of the week, including Saturday, in which the picture theatre was the exclusive preserve of whites. A trace of this appears in *Australia*, in a further scene set in the picture theatre on the eve of the Japanese bombing. Against the backdrop of newsreel footage of the evacuation of Darwin, the local police constable whispers through the curtained entrance of the cinema to tell the antagonist, Neil Fletcher, that Nullah and his grandfather, King George, had been caught. In this scene, Fletcher sits right at the very back row, in what is perhaps the best seat in the house. The camera reveals that the audience that night was whites only.<sup>2</sup>

So, despite what Bandy Legs tells Nullah about him having 'every right' to go to the pictures, the fact of the matter was that he did not and neither did she. Indeed, rather than a given right, it is more true to say that the right to go to the movies was something that Aboriginal people in different parts of Australia actively fought for during this period. They contested their exclusion from, and their segregation within, cinemas. For instance, the short-lived newsletter, *Australian Abo Call*, which was the organ of the Aborigines Progressive Association, printed an article in 1938 entitled 'Australia's Dark Background', which itemised the pervasive segregation of Aboriginal people in rural Australian society. After citing the pub and local dances, it noted that: 'At the cinema shows, [Aborigines] are put in a special paddock, right up against the screen'. The article concluded that: 'Not until White Australians learn to behave decently toward the dark Australians will this Commonwealth will be able to boast that it is a civilised community' (3). Activist Faith Bandler, who led the campaign for the 1967 Referendum, received her early political education through her and her family's experiences of racial discrimination in northern New South Wales. In 1951, her brother and sister-in-law protested against the segregation of the local cinema in Tweed Heads in northern New South Wales by writing to their local member of federal parliament. They complained: 'When entering the [cinema] the Coloured People are allowed one area and the Whites another area and the coloured people feel that it is a slight against their Freedom' (cited in Lake 571). They further objected to being 'herded' into one area, as though they were little more than animals. These examples indicate that Aboriginal people did not passively accept practices of racial segregation, but nonetheless they persisted in many places up until the 1960s.

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2 An example of Luhrmann's trademark nod to other films is the poster on the wall in this scene. It advertises *The Squatter's Daughter*, an early Australian film in which a young woman is nearly duped of her father's sheep property by an 'evil' overseer on an adjoining property by the name of Fletcher.

These various personal and collective experiences, histories and memories of the social activity of going to the movies is further fleshed out when Luhrmann turns his camera onto the audience gathered at the local Darwin cinema one night to watch *The Wizard of Oz*.

### III. Double take: turning the camera on racial segregation in Australian cinemas

The film that Bandy Legs, Sing Song and Nullah see at the movies is, not surprisingly, the *Wizard of Oz*. The scene shown playing on the outdoor screen is Dorothy singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', a song that in *Australia's* narrative had (strangely) impelled Nullah to overcome quickly his grief at his mother's death and to participate in Lady Sarah Ashley's dream to drive her cattle to Darwin. Important as that song and that film is to *Australia's* narrative, perhaps as striking is the ways in which Luhrmann also uses it as an occasion to say something about the social history of cinema-going in Australia. In this scene set in the Pearl Picture Gardens, he dwells only momentarily on the *Wizard of Oz* flickering on the screen before turning his own movie camera onto the audience who watches it. From this vantage point, Luhrmann's camera reveals *in a flash* the composition of the cinema's audience. The front rows of backless wooden benches are occupied by Aboriginal, Asian and Islander men and women, dressed up for a big night out at the movies, their eyes glued and their necks craned (see Image 1).

As the camera pans through the cinema, from front to back (reversing the direction of the pre-film animated sequence discussed above), in search of Nullah, it is possible to see that the seats at the back are occupied by whites only. But it is on the front rows that the camera initially pauses. From this front-of-screen position facing into the cinema, Luhrmann's movie camera is made to occupy the same position as earlier still cameras, which snapped for posterity cinema audiences in 1920s and 1930s Australia (see Image 2), and in the process produced incidentally, or accidentally, a visual archive of segregated cinemas (Abel).



Image 1: Still from *Australia*, directed by Baz Luhrmann. Used by permission. 'AUSTRALIA' ©2008 Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

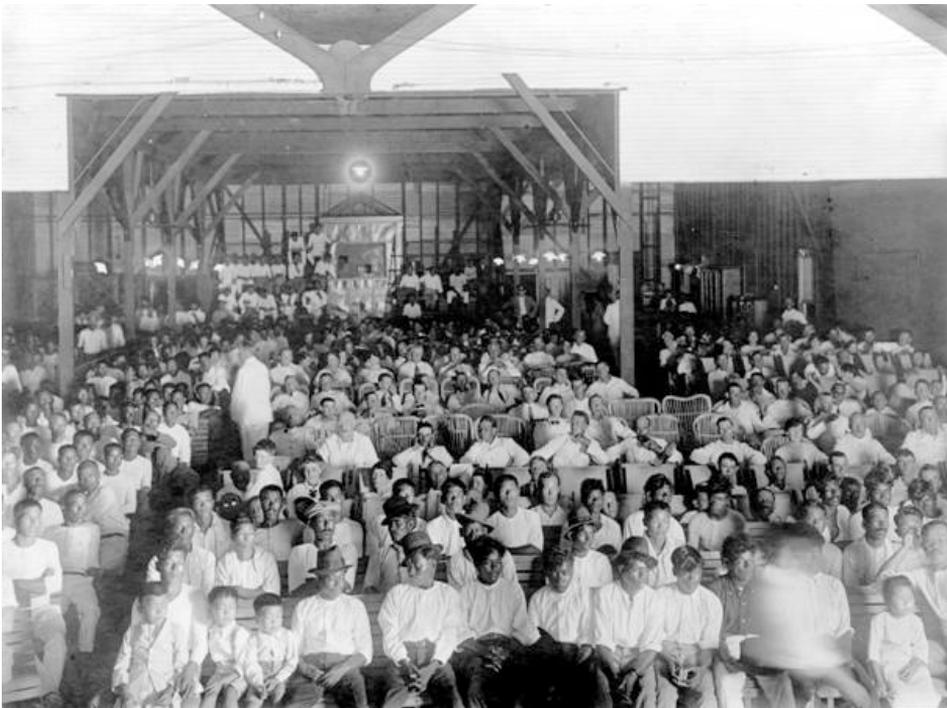


Image 2: An audience at the Sun Picture Gardens, Broome, Western Australia, c. 1920. Used by permission, State Library of Western Australia, image no. 000816D

This is an anomalous archive of historical photographs that bears witness to racially stratified cinemas. Usually taken to commemorate a social or historic event, such as the arrival of the talkies, or the opening night of a new picture theatre, they cannot but help to reveal the racial spatial arrangement of Australian cinema audiences. Ironically, given that Aboriginal people were typically confined to the very front rows, these photographs reveal the very segregation that it is now difficult for some sections of Australian cinema-going public to recall.

These photographs corroborate Aboriginal people's insistent and vivid narration of cinema spaces. When Russell Saunders recalls his experience of going to the movies in Taree in the 1950s, he emphasises the viewing position afforded from the front rows:

You sat in the first four rows with your head like this [demonstrates craned neck], and you watched the pictures. You looked behind you and there was people right up the back up in other seats, and also the top balconies, that had a better view. Our view was like this [demonstrates craned neck again], looking up at the screen ... (Cited in Byrne and Nugent 95-6)

This account is mirrored in other remembrances. Russell Saunders' uncle, Warner Saunders, told me: 'They were very strict, too, them [picture] theatres (laughs). We had one little place up the front where all the Kooris used to sit. You weren't allowed to sit down the back. You were roped off up the front. You got a sore neck lookin' straight up (laughs)' (cited in Byrne and Nugent 162). Isabel Flick, an Aboriginal woman from Collarenebri in western New South Wales, also dwelt on the sore neck syndrome in her reminiscences: 'All the blacks were herded down the front and all the whites at the back. We were right under the screen—there we were, screwing our necks up—they even had ropes around us. That kind of exclusion went on till 1962. Until I said it was time to cut the ropes!' (Flick and Goodall 90). Ella Simon likewise recalled that: 'The black people used to have to sit down at the very front, looking straight up at the screen. They weren't allowed to sit anywhere else' (Simon 181). This action of looking 'straight up' at the screen is the angle that Luhrmann captures when he initially showed *The Wizard of Oz* playing on the cinema's outdoor screen. The scene showing Dorothy singing is shot from below the screen, as well as through the shadows of a criss-crossed iron grate, which is possibly the iron fretwork of the outdoor stage. For those seated at the very front, this structure might well have obscured their view.

In their various accounts, Aboriginal people do not emphasise what they saw on the screen at the movies, but the angle at which they saw it. The emphasis is on the bodily experience of looking straight up at the screen, and of being

conscious of having white people behind you, or over you if they were seated in the balcony. This is the reverse of the spatial arrangement of cinemas commonly found in North America in the same period. There, white cinema proprietors looked for ways to manage race relations within the cinemas they operated, and the convention became to reserve the balcony for black patrons. The balcony could be entered by a separate staircase, much like the side doors that Aboriginal people were required to use to get to their section at the front. As Elizabeth Abel notes, this arrangement in which black people sat up high in the balcony overlooking the white patrons below, represented an odd spatial reversal of relationships of domination and subordination. She suggests that interpreting the implications and experiences of this spatial reversal necessarily relies on the ways in which black cinema-goers remember and narrate their experiences of the cinema as social space (Abel 57). In the Australian context, the configuration of the internal space of the cinema mirrored (rather than inverted) relations of domination and subordination. The whites sat above the blacks, reinforcing a sense of surveillance over them as well as their containment in the least desirable section of the cinema from which to watch. Nonetheless, understanding what it felt like to occupy that space depends just as much on listening to the ways in which Aboriginal people talk about it.

By turning his camera onto the audience, Luhrmann allows his contemporary, early twenty-first century audience, in Australia and beyond, to see the ways in which Australian cinema audiences were racially stratified. He takes his contemporary audience into an earlier cinema space, and invites them to watch another cinema audience watching another film about another place called Oz. As he does so, he brings to light the 'spatial and social shape of racism' that was so recognisable to Marcia Langton that she found herself looking for her own seat in the film's replica cinema.

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