

## Wool blend: Sheep and the Australian social fabric

*The sheep was one of the first animals created, since it could supply for mankind all that was most necessary—meat, milk and clothing.*

English proverb<sup>1</sup>

*At the origin of the nation, we find a story of the nation's origin.*

Geoffrey Bennington<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this book is to posit and explore a relationship between a series of films produced in different periods of Australian history—a relationship based on the observation of a set of common preoccupations in the films and linked by a representative trope: the repeated image of sheep. Somewhat prosaically I describe these films as the 'sheep films'. In looking at the repeated representation of sheep (themselves an index of repetitiveness), I intend to explore in detail the importance and implication of discourses of originality in the Australian cinema and to identify an inclination for 'originary' thinking in some Australian film criticism and historiography.

*Sheep and the Australian Cinema* focuses in detail on two key sheep films: *The Squatter's Daughter* (Hall, 1933) and *Bitter Springs*

(Smart, 1950). Both films are explicitly concerned with the national project, in which sheep-growing and nation-building are seamlessly aligned. Yet the specific depiction of sheep in these films signals a supplementary impulse that belies an incomplete or partial alterity that is, in turn, suggestive of misgivings at the heart of the national project. In *The Squatter's Daughter* this takes form in the depiction and subsequent discussion of impairment and disability in relation to underlying conceptions of individual and national 'originality'. In *Bitter Springs* a utopic vision of national origins occurs in a depiction of Aboriginal assimilation, an unravelling government policy that had particular influence on the conditions under which the film itself was produced.

I argue that it is precisely in their emphasis on textual reiteration and repetition that the sheep films engage in a critique of an otherwise ostensibly 'national' vision. There is an internal tension between the nationalising project (directed as it is to delineation and distinction) and the overwhelming and enormous presence of Australia's cine-sheep in these films. In this sense the very same films that are commonly held aloft as shining exemplars of a national expressiveness might also be found to be more ambivalently placed towards their role in the national cinema, calling into question the very idea of a collective 'origin' from which national cinemas are purported to spring.

In his documentary *40,000 Years of Dreaming*, George Miller explains the Australian cinema as a sort of 'whitefella's Dreaming'. 'Movies', he says, 'are the white men's songlines that sing us into being.'<sup>3</sup> In fact, this very phrase, 'whitefella's dreaming', was his original title for the film.

As a bald statement, Miller's radical attempt to situate Australian films alongside or as an extension of Aboriginal belief systems attributes to the national cinema a far greater spiritual richness and significance than it deserves. His statement is more interesting (and defensible), however, if it is taken to mean that Australian films adopt the role of foundation stories or 'creation' myths for white national culture in this country. In this sense, Miller is restating an evident link between national cinemas and the ontological. National cinemas, like many origin fables, occupy *illo tempore*: the magical time of beginnings. The way the history of the Australian cinema is written and

rewritten as an unending litany of 'firsts' and 'rebirths', and the way these histories invariably stress the parallel arrival of the Cinematographe and the national Constitution, evokes a mythical connection between the provenance of the cinema and of the nation in Australia. But the circumstantial thread that weaves between cinema, nation and origins is not just drawn of specific historical coincidence.

All *national* cinemas are 'ontological' in some sense. National cinemas act like a primal scene. They constitute the unlikely gaze at one's own conception (as a nation)—at once self-effacing and conceiving—an impossible moment of perceptual mastery. A moment that should equally be understood as an act of (self-)consumption as it is defined as an act of (self-)production.

National cinemas present and re-present the arrival of the nation *to itself*. Fully absorbed in the thrall of their own genesis, national cinemas are comfortable in the knowledge that they have left *nothing unthought*. Theirs is a narcissistic, complacent self-presence. National cinemas are satiated by their own sense of (mind)fullness. They understand and explain themselves in the all-consuming, all-producing terms of 'originary' or foundational thinking—an impossible, totalising thinking that purports to account for everything by getting 'downunder' to the ground of all things.

In matters genealogical, the quest for Origins is invariably the search for a sort of vanishing point of history—an amniotic abstraction where differences, disparities and divergences (the conditions of classification) disappear. The quest for national origins is in some sense also about the desire for a type of invisibility or indistinguishability, an undifferentiated One-ness from which (national) identity might be mercurially discerned but into which it might equally disappear. This search for origins treads carefully between a desire to assert identity and the constant fear of its desertion.

Many Australian films (particularly those preoccupied with their own identity, their national status or Australianness) are characterised by a want of knowledge (of origins) as both a narrative and a formal feature. And often these preoccupations hang in uneasy balance—as if the more attracted to the solace of (originary) invisibility, the more hyperbolic the discursive pronouncements of a film's 'Australianness'. The films that perhaps best exemplify this crossed

purpose are the Australian sheep films. In these films repeated images of amorphous, abstracted mobs of sheep come to represent *both* an emblematic image of national abundance *and* the comforts of anonymity, the retreat from identity.

The Australian sheep films occur, like the looping sheep themselves, at regular intervals in the history of the national cinema. They include among their number the feature films *A Girl of the Bush* (Franklyn Barrett, 1921), *The Breaking of the Drought* (Franklyn Barrett, 1920), *The Squatter's Daughter* (Ken G. Hall, 1933), *Bitter Springs* (Ralph Smart, 1950), *The Sundowners* (Fred Zinnemann, 1960), *Funny Things Happen Downunder* (Joe McCormick, 1965), *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1975), *L'Australie* (Jean-Jacques Andrien, 1989), *No Worries* (David Elfick, 1993) and *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995).

These films are linked by a common, repeated thread—each employing a set of stock visual and thematic motifs. In particular, they mull over questions of fabrication and reproducibility in Australian culture—and the associated themes and strategies of repetition, productivity, breeding, domestication, parentage, cultural maintenance and so on that such a preoccupation might suggest. Both the fear and promise of cultural domestication are threaded through tangled plots that are, if nothing else, decidedly woolly. In the sheep films, Australia is represented graphically as a pregnant paddock, filled to the brim with a teeming, repetitious mass of sheepish equivalence—a country in little need of variety or difference but continually engaged in the futile process of domesticating contradiction and paradox. Even a film like *The Breaking of the Drought*, which shocked contemporary viewers with its explicit images of the effects of long-term drought on livestock and landscape, derived its power from the idea that the 'natural' state of the Australian landscape was quite the opposite.

For film historians these are challenging films. Conventional histories of the Australian film industry have invested heavily in the idea of a cinema not unlike the wool industry—a cinema that boasts of national creativity and abundance in the face of environmental hardship.<sup>4</sup> But they might have overlooked half the story. In their analyses, so many Australian film historians have become partial—overly invested in the dynamics of (self-)production at the expense of the 'unthought' role of (self-)consumption, which equally informs the

national cinema. There is a missing discourse of consumption in the way the Australian cinema is understood. This lost discourse might take the form of an interest in national audiences (or the lack of them), or the role of the intertext in debates about 'pure authorship' in the Australian cinema (the way films and their authors might 'consume' one another), or the ways in which discourses of 'assimilation' continue to circulate through Australian films and their critical reception.

The key problem for the film historian is not how to make the Australian cinema *more* productive, to argue for structural redress, to urge for alternative or improved expressions (although these critical practices are not without merit in some contexts). The problem is how to change our own process of understanding, how, for example, to approach the matter of origins in the Australian cinema outside the impossible, totalising terms of 'originary thinking'; how instead to understand the forms of originary comprehension as presented by the films themselves without reiterating the claim of total understanding; then to understand the implications of this approach for the practice of film history, especially its stated mission to discover in past events lessons for the future of the national cinema. If, for example, we acknowledge from the outset that our thinking is lacking, if we abandon the belief that *in principle* everything is comprehensible, then we cannot also claim with any certainty to be predictive.<sup>5</sup>

There are, then, two key aspects of the question of origins that mark most attempts to understand the originary in Australian cinema: the implications of its 'impossibility' as a totalising instance of conception, and the way in which it is itself conceived by critics and filmmakers alike as a pure moment of production (without consumption). This book, in exposing the unthought discourses of consumption in the Australian cinema (specifically in the sheep films), is not attempting to restore some kind of 'fullness' or completion to the national cinema's originary claims (restoring both production and consumption at the heart of the originary moment) but rather to show how claims of self-presence are impossible (the contingency of production and consumption in the origin meaning that moments of originary conception are always simultaneously erased).

For the philosopher Mark C. Taylor the impossibility of originary thinking lies equally in the belief that on the one hand everything is

comprehensible (and the resultant assertion that nothing remains unthought) and, on the other, that nothing remains unthought as the result of an inability to 'think nothing'.<sup>6</sup> These two observations are implicitly linked. Originary thinking does not—cannot—think 'nothing' (of anything). Originary thinking is always partial, even when it claims—especially when it claims—comprehension. What it suspects that it does not know originary thinking simply recasts as a type of conceptual *terra nullius*—a present absence to which it can lay claim. Originary thinking is able to think nothing only if it is reducible or derivative from identity (Nothing). Or, to put it another way, identity defines 'nothing' in binary terms, as the absence that constitutes its essence such that Nothing is really the 'presence of the absence of being'.<sup>7</sup> And, as a presence of sorts, Nothing opens itself to the possibility of re-presentation. The pressing question, then, is how to 'think nothing' rather than Nothing: how to imagine the absence of the presence of absence; how to think what is not precisely present nor necessarily completely absent. For Taylor, the task of thinking 'is to think nothing otherwise than by not thinking'.<sup>8</sup> It could be that the complacency of originary thinking is challenged best by a form of thinking that is pervaded by ambivalence (a thinking nothing of Nothing).

There is a scene in Spike Jonze's film *Being John Malkovich* that attempts something close to a cinematic representation of the impossibilities of originary thinking. Midway through the film the actor/character John Malkovich enters his own head to watch himself literally 'through his own eyes'. What he sees is a restaurant in which every person is Malkovich himself and in which every word uttered is also 'Malkovich' and, in a punning gesture to this scene of extreme self-assimilation, every menu item is also 'Malkovich'. In so directly linking a scene of self-consuming 'in-sight' or knowledge with language, by collapsing representation and self-knowledge into the experience of comprehensive representative repetition, Jonze exposes the end-logic of originary thinking as ludicrous. In this scene, all identity is reducible to the Same. There is no 'John Malkovich' that can be distinguished from 'John Malkovich'. Later the film continues its speculations on origins concluding with an 'impossible' birth (in which two women conceive) but in which (gendered) sameness gives rise to difference.

Originary thinking seeks, like John Malkovich, to be totally comprehensive. To comprehend everything is to think the ground of

all things; to return things to their point of origin is to comprehend everything. Which—as *Being John Malkovich* points out—can simply mean the reiteration of what can be known or is already known, the reassertion of the indices of self (such as name or self-image). Or, as John Berger succinctly puts it: ‘All theories of ultimate origin are only ways of better defining what followed.’<sup>9</sup> Originary thinking leaves nothing unthought, nothing unsaid and nothing unseen. It is the ultimate assertion of authorship in that the author (the conceiver) and the thought (the concept, the conceived) are the same. Or at least this is its conceit. Originary thinking is actually partial because it claims to have thought of everything, but at exactly the same time it cannot ‘think nothing’. No search for origins will ever be *fully* satisfied. Originary thinking represents a failure to recognise the ambivalence (the thinking nothing of anything) that underlies and undermines any claim to total understanding. Originary thinking (at the precise point at which it claims comprehension) is always partial (one-sided, biased). Therein lies its ‘impossibility’.

What is most interesting about many of the Australian films that explicitly concern themselves with the question of (their) national origins are the convoluted manoeuvres by which they contend with the ‘Ab-*original*’ (invariably imagined in the singular). It is the *specific* interaction between the national cinema’s privileged claims for the originary and the many indigenous inhabitants of Australia that George Miller’s catchy phrase, ‘whitefella’s Dreaming’, however suggestive, fails to account for. The national cinema might allow whitefellas to repeatedly re-present their origins to themselves, but what remains inconsequential for Miller is the relationship of the cinema to indigenous Australians specifically. In suggesting that the Australian cinema is either an approximation or expansion of ‘the Aboriginal’, Miller resorts to a type of ‘originary thinking’, simultaneously calling forth and then summarily cancelling ‘the Aboriginal’ in order to dignify his own preoccupation with the origins of white Australian culture. In doing so, Miller thinks Nothing of indigenous Australians.

When he wasn’t explicitly theorising the genesis of the Australian cinema, George Miller was generating one of the most popular films ever made here. By 2003 *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995) was the fifth-highest box office earner in Australia and the second-highest earning

Australian film (after *Crocodile Dundee*). Miller completed *40,000 Years of Dreaming* at the same time he was producing *Babe*, and it's not surprising to see some of his theoretical concerns about Australian cinema reappear in a different form in *Babe*.<sup>10</sup> *Babe* is the story of a parentless pig in search of his identity. His identity crisis is in part inspired by his economic circumstances (he needs to find an indispensable role in the farmyard economy) and in part by more private existential considerations (at one point in the film he actually asks, 'Who am I?'). Babe's search for a productive identity centres on the active avoidance of consumption—his own. In his desperate endeavour to avoid his own delivery to the dinner table, Babe determines to herd sheep. His newfound identity as a sheep-pig is granted by Farmer Hoggett (a man who is himself identified by a designation that is both porcine and ovine—a hogget is a sheep yet to be sheared) after a moment of public performance in which Babe demonstrates an uncharacteristic capacity for reconciliation that allows him to assert his mastery over a group of misunderstood sheep.

*Babe's* use of sheep is instructive. The indistinguishable sheep are an obstacle in Babe's quest for an individual identity. Babe must literally overcome the fluid sheep by organising them into ordered movement. As he organises the sheep he also thinks about them for the first time. According to the film, he must get to know the sheep in order to know himself. But thinking about the sheep is not enough. Babe's transformation into the gallant sheep-pig of the film's title occurs only when he learns to think *like* a sheep. In being (albeit strategically) woolly-minded, Babe learns something valuable about compromise, flexibility and survival. But given this, Babe's thinking (like a sheep) is ultimately self-serving. In his totalising approach to thought, Babe literally goes the whole hog—he thinks like a pig thinking like a sheep-dog thinking like a sheep.

As the film would have it, the sheep in *Babe* are in dire need of direction—provided by the boundary-riding sheep-pig Babe, who in turn seeks fluidity—provided by the amorphous sheep. In this way the narrative posits a relationship between *Babe* and the sheep of apparent and calculated mutual benefit. Story over. Except that the film provides absolutely no dramatic motivation or narrative reason for the sheep to be herded. Their only purpose in the film, and therefore the only explanation given for their sudden need for a director, is

to assist Babe in articulating his identity. In this sense it is not Babe who defines the boundaries for the sheep by giving them direction but rather the other way around: it is the sheep who provide a definition, through counterpoint, to Babe. They 'give' him agency (and he gives them Nothing in return). Babe needs their 'nothingness', which he alone must transform into something (Nothing). This, in the end, constitutes Babe's sought-after productivity. But it is not only Babe who seeks a productive purpose. The film's narrative momentum is also strategic, focused on the production of a happy ending. The movement of the sheep is captured and canalised as much for this broad narrative purpose as it is for Babe's specific story. In their respective conclusions, neither Babe nor *Babe* can abide purposelessness.

*Babe* is nowhere near the first instance of such characters or concerns in the Australian cinema. Sheep recur *en masse* in Australian films, and usually their appearance signals a narrative enquiry into the production of identity. It would be easy to see the longing for origins harboured in these films of indistinguishable sheep—their nostalgia for other times, or places or cinemas—as an analogical story of the Australian cinema itself. But Australia's sheep stars are not simply a deliberate metaphor for loss of identity. These sheep are also something other than a significant or signifying presence. The challenge is how to think of these repeated images of sheep as being less than significant, to describe their ambivalent movements, rather than a purposeful movement towards ambivalence; to see the vacillations, tremblings, drifts, the unproductive, the near misses, misconceptions, futile subplots and questionable origins without recuperating them for a particular function or overarching argument. The challenge these sheep present for film historians is how to think 'nothing' of them rather than simply recuperate them or cause them to add up to something else or not to think of them at all.

This book is not attempting to look at the occasional history of sheep films in Australia in order to present a tidy teleology of Australian cinema, as if each individual film is an aspirational element, adding upwards and onwards to the prospect of a more complete or successful later and larger national cinema. Nor does it suggest the inverse, that the past is simply a purposeful journey towards the destination of an ambivalent future. Instead, I want to take as my object of study passing

moments of hesitant and directionless movement captured in the repeated image of sheep in the Australian cinema. If *Sheep and the Australian Cinema* can be said to have a stated purpose it is simply to consider not only the presence but also the ‘nothingness’ of these cine-sheep. Its challenge is to think ‘nothing’ ... in the sense that we have a responsibility to challenge habitual thinking (the thinking something of ...) and in the sense of thinking nothing as a form of operative ambivalence (a thinking nothing of ...). In which films might just be films (rather than a cinema). And sheep might just be sheep ...

### **A sheep is just a sheep**

*I for one don't give a damn where 'we' came from or  
where 'we' are going.*

Philip Brophy<sup>11</sup>

*Australia must advance and populate, or perish.*

Billy Hughes<sup>12</sup>

In 1937 the Australian postal service released a series of stamps celebrating Australia's native animals. The usual suspects were rounded up and memorialised in the name of the nation's communications: a kangaroo (1s. 2d.), a koala (4d.), a kookaburra (6d.), a platypus (9d.) and a lyrebird (1s.) were released one after the other. But the animal in the midst of the series was unexpected. At centre-stage of our postal celebration of native fauna was the familiar profile of a fat overladen merino (5d.)—as if sheep had been there right from the beginning, bound up with both the land and the nation. By 1934 Australian sheep had been both naturalised and nationalised, a symbol of our ‘native’ difference and our place in a global, colonial taxonomy of ‘State’ animals.

The controversial communist journalist Egon Kisch, who visited Australia in their year of release, made special note of this stamp series: ‘The stamps of Australia also obey the word of John, the theologian. They bestow honour and glory on the lamb and its first apostle.’<sup>13</sup> Here, Kisch makes a punning reference both to the biblical John and to pioneer wool-grower John Macarthur and his reproductive legacy: ‘The seed of this apostle is still living and the seed of his seed—the

flocks which he bred are still living, and both are looked upon as the first families in the land.<sup>14</sup> Kisch's attentions, however, lie squarely with the uncredited and founding family of sheep themselves and not the conventionally acclaimed Macarthurs: 'Thanks to its sheep Australia reigns over the wool market of the world, and the sheep reign over Australia; their development has determined that of the continent.'<sup>15</sup> As Kisch sees it, sheep are themselves figured as the nation's originators, fundamental to Australia's national development. They are applauded because they encapsulate a moment of 'pure' origination that supersedes any prior or competitive claims to the originary (such as those of indigenous Australians or even convicts). Kisch's admiration, on the other hand, is strictly ironic. For Kisch, the celebration of the merino's apparently unfettered productivity, its contribution to national fullness, ignores at its peril an 'unsettling' trail of emptiness and devastation:

For love of sheep, the courses of rivers were followed, and the inland regions disclosed.

For love of sheep, the land was taken away from small wheat farmers.

For love of sheep, whole forests were destroyed by fire and ring-barking.

For love of sheep, it was thought that the aborigines should be exterminated.<sup>16</sup>

In a string of poetic observations, Kisch carefully lowers the sheep from the highpoints of Australian history and in so doing recalls an earlier and equally disquieting study. In 1909 the celebrated Australian historian C. E. W. Bean embarked on a year of intensive sheep research in western New South Wales. His findings were published periodically in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'The Wool Land' before being collated into *On the Wool Track*, a monumental study of the habits of sheep—and the shearers, boundary-riders, bullock-teams and the swagmen they shared the landscape with. Bean's primary quest in *On the Wool Track* was to locate the meaning of sheep to Australia. His findings were unexpectedly bleak: 'There, around Lake Eyre, and over some parts of Central Australia, you may see them today—deserted homesteads standing out from the desert

with the marks of old settlement around them. That is what sheep mean to Australia.<sup>17</sup>

For Bean, sheep can be represented only in terms of the condition of their absence as the trace of their (prior) presence. A sheep is quantifiable by its remainder. The price of a sheep's hermeneutic repletion is an immanent completion—a state in which nothing more can be absorbed—an extreme absence (sheep runs without sheep), and a type of redundancy (remnant homesteads that provide shelter to no one). Bean finds in the trace of their passing simultaneously a significatory absence and redundancy—a sort of hermeneutic cannibalisation. Sheep graze the field of signification. They literally and metaphorically eat us out of house and home.

Bean's empty homestead where neither human nor animal is at home is a placeless place—and the very terms of his description make it imperative to (re)think the uses to which the distinction between the world of animals and the world of humans can be put. In an empty space, who is my neighbour? With whom or what do I dwell?

Bean reiterates the structuring absence of sheep early in his research. With no hint of irony, he tells us that there is apparently nothing to say about sheep: “‘It’s a cur’ous thing,” said the bullock driver, shifting his pipe from one corner of his straight, strong, comprehensive mouth to the other, “it’s a cur’ous thing, when you think about it, that though most has made our whack out of ’em, you never ’eard tell a good yarn about a sheep.”<sup>18</sup> Bean's anonymous bullock driver goes on to suggest that horses and bullocks, on the other hand, are just like humans, and he proceeds to prove his point with one anecdote after another. He further concedes that Cattle are not just Clever—they're dead crafty.

The journalist Bean needs little convincing. He adds to the litany of sheeply sins the following observation: ‘Everyone has a yarn to tell about his dog and his horse, and even his cow and his cat. But whoever tells yarns about his sheep—even about their vices? The sheep hasn't got any. It hasn't apparently any character at all. The best way to describe it is to describe what it hasn't got.’<sup>19</sup> A sheep, Bean says instead, is just a sheep. It is on the one hand without pretensions to humanness (character), but it also holds no mystery to us.

According to Bean and his bullock driver, the mannerisms of sheep belong only to themselves. Sheep are themselves and only

themselves. Insular. Self-evident. Sheep cannot be subjected to the realm of narrative since in their insularity they do not possess the attributes of the conventional. Indeed it is only at another representational extreme, when sheep are erased of all singularity and revered as an operator for mimicry, that they are invested with a type of conventionality. To follow *like a sheep* is to abandon singularity in favour of conformity.

C. E. W. Bean's early twentieth-century sheep anticipate Dolly, the *fin de siècle* sheep clone, almost a century later. Both represent an extreme absence (nought, the possible) and an extreme presence (the redundant, the many). Without attribute, sheep are fleeced, naked, entirely possible. No difference and complete difference both produce the undifferentiated. These sheep dwell in the province of being both similar to (as a sequence of repetition) and becoming 'similar' (as a generic state of indistinguishability). In Bean's observation, the blankness of sheep are mimetically foreshadowed and followed by the emptiness of the spaces they occupy.

Sheep pass (in the various senses of the word). They proceed; and the result is a something that is also a nothing. Sheep increase, multiply, occupy space; there are only sheep. Their blankness is pure processuality. There is no conversion. Sheep, like those counted by the insomniac, are continuously stepping aside—to make room—for another sheep whose function is to step aside ... and so on. If a sheep is indeed just a sheep, each is implicated in the process of garnering other sheep—rather than meaning, for example. They are engaged in a process of 'sheeping' or flocking. These sheep are not solely objects. They elude a model of knowing objects, of objects that can be 'known', not because their meaning is elusive, or because they require deeper or different comprehension, but because there is nothing to be known. To 'know' a sheep in this way is merely to acknowledge its nothingness.

The Australian sheep films, in arguing that sheep are what 'Australia' lacks, reverse Bean's structure of supplementarity in the conception(s) of the nation—in which sheep are an excess and a lack in the origin. In (perhaps inadvertently) admitting the impossibility of originary comprehensiveness, these films themselves set up a process of necessary and consistent supplementation, thereby producing representation as an effect in a process of deferral that simply

produces more representation (rather than presence *per se*).

This supplementation, then, is a partial process in which the sheep films struggle towards origin and conclusion, meaning and nothingness. In this sense, the sheep films are not attempting to abjure the nation (or totality) but instead reinscribe it by representing 'representation' in terms of supplementary figures (sheep) whose presence simultaneously invokes and works against historical totalities. The problem of origins at the heart of the Australian sheep film, then, is also a problem of representation.

Commentators writing on national cinemas frequently propose models of representative difference and likeness in which the ontological status of what is represented—the nation—is seldom put into question but the tenor of its reproduction is. Critics of the Australian cinema, for example, characterise it equally in terms of a problem of (cultural) origins and a problem of (national) representation wherein national difference is repeatedly understood as a creative 'failure'—the films themselves are simply the disfigured consequence of a clumsy cultural reproduction. This book argues that the sheep films, with their evident interest in questions of breeding and purity, cultural reproduction and continuity, the mimetic and the emblematic, are a particularly rich site for questions of (this) nature, questions that resonate through the critical reception of these films many years after their initial release. It makes its arguments in relation to two sheep films specifically: *The Squatter's Daughter* (Hall, 1933), the focus of Part 2; and *Bitter Springs* (Smart, 1950), discussed in detail in Part 3.

In dividing its attention between these two key Australian sheep films this book attempts to demonstrate the impossibilities of originary thinking in and about the Australian cinema. In *The Squatter's Daughter* this is especially apparent when originary thinking is characterised as both a narrative and social problem of (self-)knowledge, of comprehension and comprehensiveness where identity and authorship are concerned. The analysis of *Bitter Springs* locates the problem of originary thinking in the way representative structures attempt to achieve closure (since totalisation or comprehensiveness is impossible). Both films must dissimulate in order to cover their own openings or origins, revealing the ways in which their representations are organised by attempted occlusions of the very conditions of those representations.

The films I write about are also interesting in that they constitute a particular way of thinking about and representing animality or, specifically, ‘sheep-ness’ in the cinema—both encompassing and declining the discursive strategies of ‘becoming’ and allegory. These sheep films are characterised by a constant entangling, confounding and substituting of their signifying terms, which makes them as tantalising for reassessment as they are resilient. In these films, sheep come to embody a series of representative ‘impossibilities’—understood at any given time in terms of both/either emblem and symptom, allegory and mimesis, produce and producer, and so on; and, in every instance, underlining the impossibilities of originary thinking as any basis for a theory of aesthetic or social organisation.

Sheep study begs—or, better—risks a kind of woolly-mindedness. It might well be that the study of sheep is one of the few pursuits in which wool-gathering—a kind of dreamy, operative absent-mindedness—might, even in the context of an academic argument, find a place of refuge.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cited in H. B. Austin, *The Merino: Past, Present and Probable*, Grahave Book Company, Sydney, 1947 (frontispiece).
- <sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Postal politics and the institution of the nation’, in *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha (ed.), Routledge, London, 1990, p. 121.
- <sup>3</sup> *40,000 Years of Dreaming* (George Miller, 1996; commissioned as part of the BBC series *A Century of Cinema*).
- <sup>4</sup> More recently the analogy of the film industry and the wool industry has been sounded as a caution. A discussion paper written to rally the film industry in the face of poor ‘branding’ almost shouts its warning: ‘Look what has happened to Australia’s once greatest industry, the wool industry. Once it enjoyed status with unprecedented political, community, investor and media support. Australians were strong consumers and the industry was one of our most important exporters. Today, Wool Brand Australia is seriously devalued at home and overseas and is facing boycotts and accusations of cruel industry practices ...’ Ian Sutton for the Australian Screen Council (2005), ‘Discussion paper’, <http://www.australianscreencouncil.org/about.html>, accessed 9 September 2005.
- <sup>5</sup> Although my theoretical framework differs from his, the idea that film history is necessarily defined by its incompleteness and partiality is taken up at the conclusion of Tom O’Regan’s unsurpassed meditation on the

national cinema in Australia: *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 354. O'Regan's call for modesty on the part of film critics and historians derives in part from his argument that the national cinema itself is an 'unprincipled assemblage' incapable of a general principle or unitary explanation (p. 40).

<sup>6</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Tears*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1990, p. 204.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> John Berger, 'Why look at animals?' in *About Looking*, Vintage Books, New York 1991, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Although *Babe* was written and directed by Chris Noonan, George Miller as producer is most commonly identified as the film's author.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Brophy, 'Cinesonics: Dinosaur sounds', *Real Time/On Screen* 35, (February/March 2000), p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Apocryphally uttered in February 1935, when Hughes was Minister for Health and Repatriation.

<sup>13</sup> Egon Kisch, *Australian Landfall*, Martin Secker & Warburg, London, 1937, p. 260.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 267–8.

<sup>17</sup> C. E. W. Bean, *On the Wool Track*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1985, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 11–12.