

## **Mapping Australia: Cinematic Cartographies of (Dis)location.**

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### **Title: Mapping Australia: Cinematic Cartographies of (Dis)location.**

**Abstract:** What stories do the maps in Baz Luhrmann's film, *Australia* (2008), tell? Deployed in most films to establish a 'national geography', maps can also question the very boundaries that they depict. Filmed maps serve to locate and fix places and people at the same time as they mobilise, thereby introducing notions of dislocation and relocation. While cinematic cartography locates the film narrative, it also asks audiences to consider where they are in the narrative and in doing so reminds them that they are not where the map says it is taking place and that the story that is said it be there is, in fact, nowhere. Or perhaps, elsewhere. From a perspective of cinematic cartography this article invites a consideration of the relationship of the screen image to time, place, space and mobility by examining the points at which the maps inscribed in *Australia* reveal a transnational cinema. These maps, it is argued, offer itineraries allowing us to trace cultural flows as they travel to and from global, national and local cinemas, revealing the geopolitical milestones that map notions of home and away.

**Keywords:** cinematic cartography; Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*; location/dislocation

### **1. Introduction**

Initially, movies and maps might appear to have little in common: films move while maps tend to be static; films belong to the realms of art and popular culture while maps relate to the world of science. Upon closer examination, however, they share much common ground. They both communicate visually to delineate and describe the space in which we live. They both refer their audiences and readers to political, historical and social contexts of their time. Maps, of course, are overtly symbolic in a way that film can obscure by a naturalistic portrayal of time and place but however realistic and accurate they aspire to be, each can only ever *represent* the reality of the world we live in. Importantly, both films and maps tell stories. Sometimes tall stories: *Hic sunt dracones* ('Here be dragons') claimed the legend on the early sixteenth-century Lenox Globe to denote unexplored territory.<sup>1</sup> And unknown territory is precisely where many filmmakers aim to take their audiences. Enabling us to fix

time and space for a short moment, films and maps both tell stories about the known world to reveal a new world. They are two ways humans have devised to chart the unknown territory of our imagination.

The world, its people, places and spaces, lie at the heart of any film or map, but neither can claim to *be* reality. The short stories describing the futility of creating a map of the world in the same scale by Jorge Luis Borges ('On Exactitude in Science') and Umberto Eco ('On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1') demonstrate there is no such thing as a true map.<sup>2</sup> The same is true of a film, which can only ever show a mediated representation of the world. Representation is all that either can ever aspire to. Maps and films necessarily omit or distort aspects of reality and, in doing so, they close the gap between science and art. They both communicate different views of our world and help us understand its complexity, and when a map appears in a film, different regimes of knowledge impact upon each other to tell stories in ways that visualise an understanding of our world.

## 2. The maps

The maps in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) perform a number of functions that are by no means consistent or tell the same tale. Some of these maps attempt to fix and settle a place or person in a specific space, while others invite mobility, even flight, to another space altogether. My argument is that the way in which the maps in *Australia* are deployed indicate the simultaneity of location and dislocation, the here and the there, the nowhere and the elsewhere. In all, there are seven instances of maps or mappings in the film. I first briefly describe each of these to consider their purpose and the places and spaces to which they transport characters and audiences. I then offer close readings of two maps in particular to demonstrate the value of cinematic cartography as a critical framework in which to read a cinematic map as a story that takes audiences on a journey to places well beyond the limiting confines of the film frame and the narrative.

***From Australia to England and back home.* [Illustration: still from the film.]** This is one of the two maps selected for a close reading later in this article. Although I shall treat this as a single map, it is conceivably two since it charts a round trip from Australia and back, and at the half-way point, separating the outward journey from the return leg, there is a short sequence of live action set in England. One purpose of this non-diegetic map is to collect the leading lady, the film's heroine, Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman), and bring her to Australia where she can participate in the narrative.

***Carney land map.* [Illustration: still from the film.]** This map is of the property owned by King Carney (Bryan Brown) in the Kimberley area of northern Australia. Hanging on the wall behind the desk of this appropriately named, larger than life, and despotic cattle baron, it displays the vastness of his empire – perhaps as much as a fifth of the continent. In addition to visualising this important aspect of the narrative, it also serves to reveal the links between land, cattle, and capital, and to tell a story of power and violence. The Carney Cattle Company land is boldly indicated, marked by the sign of a large triple CCC, which looks like the mark of a branding iron, and this declares land as property which is exploited.

Indicating the nature of Carney's tyrannical power, behind Australia where the ocean might be, we can see the fan-shaped rays of the sun, echoing the ominous sign of the Japanese empire. The symbolism is no accident: the narrative is set during the Second World War (1939-1945), at a time when Australians were expecting to be invaded by the Japanese.

**Billabong map. [Illustration: still from the film.]** This map hangs on the wall in Faraway Downs, the station to which the fair widow, Lady Sarah, has travelled from England upon hearing that her husband has been murdered. It depicts the boundary of the Ashley property which, unlike the previous map of Carney's empire, shows trees, animals and people – black and white – peacefully co-existing on a relatively small parcel of land completely surrounded by Carney land. Nullah (Brandon Walters), the small Aboriginal boy who lives at Faraway Downs, uses this map to explain something to Lady Ashley; an image in this instance offers evidence that words alone cannot supply. Nullah traces his finger down the river to the billabong to show the scene of a crime to 'Mrs Boss', as he calls Lady Sarah. Two crimes, in fact: the billabong is where Carney men are rustling the Ashley cattle, and also where Lord Ashley was murdered. This map gives authority to Nullah's allegations. It also tells us just how smart this ten-year-old Aboriginal child is: not only can he map-read, but he also gives Mrs Boss her first lesson in the Australian language. Wonderingly, she lets the word 'Billabong' roll around her tongue as if she is savouring a lolly with a new flavour; this is an early indication that one day Lady Sarah will call Australia home.

**Mapping the Never Never. [Illustration: still from the film.]** This is a very different kind of map from anything produced by western Europeans. It is an Aboriginal songlines map, sung by King George (David Gulpilil), Nullah's grandfather, and the man falsely accused by Carney of killing Lord Ashley. This is the second map that I shall analyse in more detail later in this article.

**Newsreel map. [Illustration: still from the film.]** There is a brief clip of a newsreel screening in a Darwin cinema, which shows soldiers frogmarching towards Australia against the spreading rays of the Japanese empire reaching out to smother Australia. In but a few seconds, this map stresses the expansion of Japanese power in the Pacific; it tells us that national borders are not being respected.

**Poor Fella Rum. [Illustration: still from the film.]** Every so often someone in the film drinks some 'Poor Fella Rum'. The label on the brown glass bottle shows the word RUM like an interior lake firmly positioned inside a map of Australia. Yes, a small joke on the part of the filmmakers. But alcohol, and rum in particular, plays an important role in *Australia* and, by implication, in the history of Australia. We see rum split asunder the rules and traditions of gender, class and heritage as it also unites: poor, working-class Drover (Hugh Jackson) is united with wealthy, aristocratic Lady Sarah over a slug of rum as they share their grief for the death of their (alcoholic) friend, Kipling Flynn (Jack Thomson); rum loosens the inhibitions of the uptight English lady and allows her to express the stirrings of desire for Drover (who synecdochally stands for Australia); we see Aborigines, women and white men drink rum together in a Darwin pub which had previously banned Aborigines and segregated women; rum also unites time and place when a small kangaroo finds an empty

bottle of Poor Fella Rum in the desert. When the joey is framed next to the bottle in a stance suggesting it has replaced the emu in the nation's coat of arms, it is hard not to infer from the film that rum has played a large part in the making of (white) Australia.

**Landscape maps. [Illustration: still from the film.]** At various points in the film, Mandy Walker's aerial cinematography shows the land as a relief map which shows the land to look like like Aboriginal landscape paintings such as those by the Western Desert artist Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri. **[Illustration of painting]** The natural, cartographic artwork of these filmed images is arresting, although the camera does not stop moving, helping to make audiences feel vertiginously at one with the land we are looking at. This questions the usual perception of landscape as something that we stand outside; even without 3D technology, the aerial cine-maps in *Australia* position audiences very much in, and a part of, the landscape, not outside it.

### 3. Mapping mobility

Another aspect of the common ground shared by films and maps revealed by a critical carto-cinematic approach is what they each tell us about location and dislocation. To explore this, I invite you to picture a globe, the man-made sort sold in toy and map shops. Imagine you want to locate a particular place, either where you are or where you'd like to be. Maps are full of places with spaces in between, and so, to move across the spaces you spin the globe to find the place you want to locate. But a spinning globe blurs land into ocean and you cannot find the place you're looking for. So you stop the globe. Now you can find that place – the country, river, forest, or dot marking the city – you were looking for. When the globe is still, you can see what you are looking for. But can you really? Are you *really* seeing what is on the planet Earth? No, of course not. Because a globe is a map which, as we know, can only ever represent what exists. Verisimilitude is the best a map can aspire to.

In reality, of course, our planet never stops spinning on its axis. The man-made globe cannot reveal how little of the real world is actually static and fixed: the mass of white ice at the top and bottom is, in fact, disappearing a bit more by the day, and in reality there is a lot less of that dark green in Indonesia and Brazil indicating a rain forest than there was an hour before. There are also those troublesome borders: a war here, a treaty there, and the border between countries is relocated. Or it disappears. As do whole nations – or else new ones appear. Either way, a map or a globe cannot reveal change or movement. For this, a new edition is required and different colour inks needs to be applied to re-draw the boundaries of the represented lands and oceans.

What never stops in the real world, is movement. The human desire to try and bring things to a standstill also never stops. We like to fix things in their right and proper place. We draw boundaries on our maps – they keep things in their place. They are the markers of difference, preserving essence and preventing contamination from what lies outside. Borders can, and do, immobilise. They control location and impose stasis; they keep people from moving from where they are to where they want to be. But once mapped, borders can also force people to move from one place to another. Mapped borders locate *and* dislocate. They perform the function of preserving and policing borders: Like Nullah and his billabong map,

we point at a map, we trace our finger along a border as if to say *this* man-made line is fixed, *this* is real, *this* tells the truth.

More accurately, of course, maps do not do this – we do this to maps. Maps contain and represent our ideas and power systems and, as Michel de Certeau discusses, maps cannot be dissociated from power, which is all about territory and boundaries; they assert ‘proper place’ in distinction to that which is placeless, or ‘out of place’.<sup>3</sup> Maps, he argues, are the weapons of the strong and the strong depend upon classification, delineation and division. The strong depend upon the certainty of mapping. My argument, however, is that if we learn to portray and read maps differently, we can unsettle this certainty.

#### **4. Filming mobility**

Arguing that places should not be thought of in terms of stasis and boundedness but as the product of processes that extend well beyond the confines of a particular place, Doreen Massey writes that a ‘sense of place, an understanding of ‘its character’ [...] can only be constructed by linking a place to places beyond. What we need [...] is a global sense of local, a global sense of place’.<sup>4</sup> What Massey says of place applies equally to film. Just we need to learn to look beyond the boundaries of a map, with its borders and its formal, fixed markers of distinction, we also need to look beyond the boundaries of the film frame to see not what is *in* it but what is *outside*. We furthermore need to become aware of what flows in and out of the film frame, because looking beyond the confines of the frame ensures that we neither ignore, nor fail to notice, that which is *not* in place.

When looking for that which is in place and that which is displaced, what is important is not the quiddity, or ‘whatness’, of what we see and hear, rather it’s the ‘whereness.’ To respond to the ‘where?’ of cinema involves looking beyond the film frame to what Arjun Appadurai refers to as ‘global cultural flows’ of phenomena as they enter and exit the frame, to and from the places and spaces beyond.<sup>5</sup> To take image and sound, the two most obvious characteristics of film, when these flow in and out of the frame they are no longer where they once were and, by occupying a new space, they may be preventing something else from entering or crowding out that which was already there. These processes are not fixed and orderly but chaotic and disjunctive. In recognising dislocation and relocation as a characteristic of these globalising processes, we cannot help but notice the somewhere else – that is, the ‘elsewhere’.

#### **5. Elsewhere**

This notion of ‘elsewhereness’ is helpful in a geo-cinematic exploration of film because it introduces an ‘alibi’, which is the Latin for ‘elsewhere’. An alibi often enters the picture when a crime has been committed, and it invites us to start looking for clues. There is no consensus as to whether a crime *has* been committed by Luhrmann’s *Australia*, although many critics and audiences are convinced there has – a cultural crime, that is, committed against the Australian national cinema. The arch criminal is usually Hollywood – a perpetual offender, widely perceived to be poised to dominate and assimilate and destroy all national and local cinemas. But it can also be any non-Hollywood cinema that manifests ‘Hollywoodization’. This crime lurks within the divided reception of Baz Luhrmann’s

*Australia* – a film that is too Hollywood for some, and not sufficiently Hollywood for others; too commercial to be a valued part of a national non-Hollywood cinema and too arty, intertextual and insufficiently commercial to be ‘true blue aussie’

The maps in Luhrmann’s *Australia* provide the clues – not to reveal who ‘dunnit’ but to enjoin us to notice that something much more interesting is going on than an alleged crime of US cultural imperialism. In most films, as Conley points out, a map provides information about a locale and directions as to how and to what place the characters are going. It is generally read as a visual support for the narrative.<sup>6</sup> A close reading of the maps in *Australia* that looks beyond the frame, however, can do much more than this. In the next section I offer a close reading of two maps to ask, not what it is we see but, where what we see takes us.

## 6. Home and away

My first reading is of the map charting the round trip from Australia and back via England. This is itinerative, taking audiences on a charted journey. It starts with Nullah narrating over an exterior, live-action wide-shot of the Faraway Downs cattle station, the place where he lives, the place that is his home: ‘This land, my people got many names for it. But white fellas call it ... AUSTRALIA.’ This shot dissolves with a fast zoom out to a map on which we can see that the property straddles a large dotted line marking the boundary between Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It is a very *white* dotted line, an imposing a (white-)man-made boundary on a land and its Indigenous peoples who had other ways of indicating territorial distinction. This line has filmic origins outside the frames of this particular map and film: it is appropriated from another film, time and place, having first appeared in Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda* (1955), set fifteen years later than *Australia*’s time frame but made just over fifty years earlier. **[Illustration: still from the film.]**

The camera continues to pull out until we see the whitefella name ‘AUSTRALIA’ casting long shadows over a large, unnamed yellow space indicating desert and sandstone. (Is it my fancy, or is this an Australianized version of a well-known, very large sign spelling out the word H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D over a Los Angeles suburb?) The zoom stops when Australia, glowing bright in a dark, greeny sea, fills a globe: Nullah’s home, a small local place, has been visually connected to the rest of the nation. It is about to be connected to the rest of the world. **[Illustration: still from the film.]**

The globe now spins in a south-easterly direction, taking us on a journey across a map of nations and oceans to the north west of Australia. With Nullah still narrating, audiences are very much physically implicated in this journey over the Indian Ocean, over the Suez Canal, and towards Europe. We have entered a story in another time, another place: we are somewhere else. But as the physical experience of flight is being visualised, the non-diegetic nature of the map reminds us that we are sitting in our seats watching a film. This is certainly bilocation, even multilocation.

On we fly, over European national borders and where Germany and Poland are yoked and cloaked in a big black-on-white swastika on a blood red background. We move on but the swastika stays menacingly fixed. **[Illustration: still from the film.]** Its potential for

expansion, however, is supplied by the audience's knowledge of European history. And so to England, reassuringly draped in the red white and blue of the Union Jack; home to many white Australians in the 1940s.

Preparing for landing, we get our first sight of an impressive building snuggled in the map of England's green and pleasant land. In we zoom, until the house dissolves seamlessly into what looks like a live-action shot (in fact, computer generated) of a very aristocratic, stately home. Unexpectedly, we seem to have landed in an English Heritage genre movie.

**[Illustration: still from the film.]**

What place is there going to be here for little Nullah here? As if to prompt this question, we lose Nullah's voice-over at this point. But if Nullah is no longer in the frame, it does not mean there is no trace of him. As we traced our way across the globe to rural England, we have been dislocated and relocated. We now find ourselves implicated in a framework of English aristocracy whose wealth and power derives from its property – some would say theft – in far-flung colonies. Their property includes land, beast and man; it includes little Nullah and the Aboriginal people whose lands were stolen, whose children were stolen, and who would not be considered worthy of Australian citizenship until 1967. **[Illustration: still from the film.]**

Back to our map: after a short live-action sequence in which a minion can scarcely bring himself to utter the word 'Australia', so alien is it to him, we scoop up Lady Sarah and set off back 'home' – although Australia is not yet the place she can call home. This closely imbricated map/journey/film sequence reverses the outward trip and, after taking her/us perilously close to the expanding rays of Japan's rising sun, sets us all down in Darwin. This is home, of course, for Australian audiences – but it is the very antithesis of home for Lady Sarah. **[Illustration: still from the film.]**

This round trip reverses the customary trajectory of white Australian history, which conventionally always starts in England. This film's map-journey, however, begins in Australia, travels to England and then returns to Australia, thus challenging the notion of where the motherland, or 'home', is. It suggests that we should listen to the ambiguity in the mantra, 'There's no place like home', from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In Elizabeth Bronfen's interpretation, this magical formula implicitly suggests there *is* no place one could call home, that is, home as a place does not exist.<sup>7</sup> *Australia* suggests that England as home does not exist.

## **7. The imperial gaze and songline mapping**

Just as cartographic knowledge has been intimately bound to the exploitative exercise of colonial power, so too has the history of cinema; the very origins of cinema coincided with 'the giddy heights of the imperial project'.<sup>8</sup> But, as Cosgrove argues, 'we should be cautious in attributing too simple a connection between the mastering European gaze, its inscription on the map, and the exercise of dominion over subject spaces and peoples'.<sup>9</sup> Other mapping traditions exist which are not so easily subordinated to such a simple formula. The narrated songlines of Australian Indigenous peoples offer an example of the cultural representation of

complex and culturally specific forms of spatial cognition and connection between people and place.

This brings us to King George's songline mapping of the Never Never, also named in *Australia* as the Kuraman Desert. This territory is imaginatively invented by fusing several real Australian outback places with computer-generated imaging. On the edges of this uncharted, imagined space, we find Lady Sarah, her soon-to-be lover, Drover, Nullah, and a few Aboriginal women and men from Faraway Downs, who have been droving the cattle to Darwin in an attempt to beat the rival Carney drove. Without water, they are doomed and immobilised for want of a map: 'There's nothing to guide you', Drover says, 'You don't know where you are.'

A map arrives in the oral form of King George's songlines map. This makes sense of disorder by recognising the importance of mobility, of linking the dots in geographic space. Drover explains to Lady Sarah that 'every rock ... tree... they're all linked so magic man sings 'em in order. He'll sing us to order, even across the Never Never.' We see and hear King George singing in his own language, showing the way across this territory that no white Australian has ever charted.

Drover is wrong, this is not magic in the sense of an illusion, trick or sleight of hand: King George's song is a form of mapping, and in *Australia* it is a cinematic acknowledgment of a different, Aboriginal way of mapping. **[Illustration: still from the film.]** It exemplifies what Cosgrove describes as 'the non-visual representational significance of the map drawing attention to the significance of representation itself'.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, back in Darwin, among the white chattering classes, the authority of King George's narrated songlines map is initially denied – as has been, and still is, so much of Aboriginal culture.

## 8. Conclusion

The maps in *Australia* bear witness to the value of looking beyond the restricting confines of both the borders on a map and the borders around a film frame. The stories they tell provide the clues for seeing and valuing flow rather than fixity, mobility rather than stasis. By unfixing cinematic borders, by seeing them as permeable, and as something through which ideas, sounds, images and other cultural phenomena can flow, we become aware of the larger picture in which flows between the local and the global take place. The non-hierarchical spatial 'flows' characterising the contemporary world render obsolete conventional mapping and cinematic practices alike, that are dominated by the logic of fixed spatial coordinates. They stimulate new forms of cartographic representations, such as the CGI mappings and remappings in *Australia* demonstrate. They also make space for, and allow us to see and hear, a much older form of geo-cinematic representation: King George's songlines map charts a territory which few conventional Western maps and films have been able to find. In telling stories about the known world, filmed maps can reveal a new world; they can also recuperate the stories of a very ancient world.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> A valuable source of information on the Lenox Globe and the history of dragons on maps can be found at the MapHist website: <http://www.maphist.nl/index.html> (accessed 15 February 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science' in *Collected Fictions*, trans. A. Hurley, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1999. Umberto Eco, 'On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1' in *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays*, (trans. W. Weaver), New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1992. Borges' story is short enough to reproduce here:

. . . In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. *Suarez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658.*

<sup>3</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', in T. Cresswell, (2006), *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, New York: Routledge, 1997, pp 54-79.

<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Public Culture* 2.2: 1990, pp 1-23. Appadurai outlines the following five dimensions of global cultural flows in terms of 'scapes':

- Ethnoscape: the landscape of persons which constitute the shifting world in which people live;
- Technoscape: the global configuration of technologies moving at high speeds across previously impermeable borders;
- Financescape: the global grid of currency speculation and capital transfer;
- Mediascape; the distribution of the capabilities to produce and disseminate information and the large complex repertoire of images and narrative generated by those capabilities;
- Ideoscape: ideologies of states and counter-ideologies of movements, around which nation-states have organised their political cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Conley, 'A Motel and a Map Room: a Stopover in *Thelma and Louise*,' *Cinematic*, 2004, 47: 5.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen, *Home In Hollywood: The Imaginary Geography of Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p 73.

<sup>8</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, London: Routledge, 1994, p 100.

<sup>9</sup> Denis Cosgrove, 'Mapping/Cartography' in D. Atkinson, P. Jackson, D. Sibley and N. Washbourne (eds), *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts* London & New York: IB Tauris, 2007, pp 27-33.

<sup>10</sup> Cosgrove, 2007, p 28.