Charles Chauvel’s film *Jedda* (1955) keeps lumbering up into view, like an indestructible iron ghost-ship emerging out of the fog ever year or two. Why it holds this particular place in the lexicon of Australian film history is contingent on several things outside of its value as filmmaking at all. It was the first Australian-directed colour film, (although Lewis Milestone had directed *Kangaroo* shot on location here in Technicolour in 1952.) But that film was American made, with two imported leads – the accent-challenged Maureen O’Hara, and Peter Lawford. I still indelibly recall Maureen O’Hara’s shiftingly Irish-accent, whilst watching a corroboree from the grey verandah estate of the landed gentry, and intoning: “Rainclouds… is it possible…will the abos really make it rain?”

And that is in itself an important statement to recall, in light of the revisionist positioning of *Jedda* as-masterwork that Jane Mills has to navigate, taking us through the rusted minefields of how *Jedda* might be viewed today both as film and as quintessential tract on race politics, in this small, tautly descriptive book re-examining *Jedda*’s place in Australian film lore. It was the success of *The Overlanders* (1946), an Ealing film made here by British director Harry Watt, that in its depiction of Chips Rafferty’s cattle drive had successfully established the viability of the ‘Antipodean Western’.

The film *Kangaroo* (1952) gives us the time-frame of a 1950s context of how Aboriginality was being placed in filmmaking here of the 1950s… with the Aboriginal corroboree as exotic native colour; as superstitious stone-age people that needed the white colonial farmer to protect them from their primitivism… although, on occasion, Maureen O’Hara might want to see them break up the drought with a rain-dance.

The second inviolable fact protecting this film *Jedda*’s status in Australian film history, is that it was Chauvel’s last film. Apart from his silent films or earlier work, he directed seven major, Australian ‘locationist’ exterior realisations of the Australian landscape as narrative. These notably included *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1940), and *The Rats of Tobruk* (1944). Apart from being the last film he directed, it was also the first Australian film to be invited in 1955 in selection at the Cannes Film Festival, which again cements its seminal ‘place’.

But most importantly of its firsts – Chauvel took the brave and then contentious step of casting two indigenous lead actors front and centre in the two key roles in the film – the role of the Aboriginal girl Jedda, played by 16 year old Rosalie Kunoth – renamed by the Chauvels, Charles and his wife Elsa, as “Ngarla”, to make her sound more indigenous. The second was a dark Aboriginal, Bob Wilson, known as “Tudawali”, in the role of Marbuk. Any one of these firsts would cement this film in the then-fading firmament of 1950s Australian filmmaking, at a time when film production here had slowed to a sorry trickle.

But why a film of that period such as *Kangaroo* (1952) attracts little revisitation is the debate still engendered
regarding the film *Jedda*’s use of authentic Aboriginal leads, and what this meant to an Australian or international perception of indigenous culture then, and now.

The Bundjalung curator and art historian Djon Mundine, on the Radio National AWAYE program in March 2014, was discussing “what suppressed primal fears surface in celluloid dreams – from Fred Schepisi’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* to Tracey Moffatt’s *Bedevil*.” This was raised in terms of “Freud and Jung describe a filmy, shadowy presence that haunts the imagination and our subconscious, a primal creature from the id.” (Radio National, AWAYE, 15th March 2014.)

The Aborigine as shadow-other in white society, as the rendered culturally invisible primitive, the dormant tribal “creature of the id”, like so many black zombies rising mystically like dark clay-creatures out of the dirt, echoing *The Golem* (1920) and clay brought to life... is in part the murky 1950s subtext to much of *Jedda*, as a film. The Aborigines on the property play in the dirt and ready themselves to go walkabout, and civilisation begins at the flywire screen door at the wide board verandah… where Jedda has been been removed from the dirt to the white, starched, British-modelled “clean” whiter-than-white life of piano playing and elocution… courtesy of the wife of the station owner adopting her, Sarah McMann.

Jane Mills in this small, provocative book on Jedda, published in 2012 as part of the Currency Press and National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) series on Australian films, outlines the plot:

> It tells the tragic story of a young Aboriginal girl of the Arunte tribe, adopted by a white woman, Sarah McMann, as a surrogate for her own baby who has died. She raises her as a white child, isolating her from Aboriginal contact. But when Marbuk, an Aboriginal man seeking work arrives on the station, Jedda is fascinated by him. (NFSA)

Sarah McMann calls out to young Joe: “Bring Jedda away from those piccaninnies. I can’t keep her clean.” (Mills 31)

Mills lends emphasis to this homogenising, purifying regime that Sarah McMann institutes across Jedda’s life, to pry her away from the uncivilised trappings of her Aboriginal tribe:

> Here, as throughout the film, cleanliness and propriety stand for whiteness, while dirt and disruption stand for Aboriginality. (31)

By their own primitive nature, the film suggests, Aboriginals are consigned to being dwellers in the dirt, somehow unfit and unwilling to accept the clean white virtues – dispossessed and displaced through their own fault and inability to assimilate. The true theme of *Jedda* that rapidly emerges is of the impact on a person brought up out of their culture. Or as Mills describes it, of: “…white settlers imposing dislocation and relocation upon the land’s traditional owners.” (11)

This film was released in Britain and America as “Jedda-the Uncivilised”, over director Charles Chauvel’s strenuous objections, mind you. It was part of a poster advertising campaign based on highly sexualising the film as a rather sordid lore of miscegenation, of inter-racial lust arising in a young Aboriginal girl. She was promoted as being wild, uncivilised, baring a breast in a pool of water, as if a Tahitian male-fantasy painting by Gauguin. Bold wording on these 1955 posters included: “The magic of the native mating call… was stronger than the habits of civilisation”, and “Eve in Ebony”, “It was Death for him to look on this girl”, and “Passionate, Primitive, Pulse-stirring.”
The sexual awakening in a young 16 year old girl, torn between a piano-playing refined, gentrified British life... and the “call of the wild” dragging her back to Marbuk, the full-blood Aboriginal, is the core of this film. It is Marbuk who Joe the half-caste stockman tells us practises: “the mysteries of the dark man’s mating. He could sing a girl to his campfire. Even against her will.” (50) These ambiguities (seduction/coercion/magic) are well identified by Jane Mills, who brings two manifest capacities to her book on this film. The first is her encyclopaedic knowledge of the American Western (as in cowboy) films of the 1940s and 50s, and the second is her geographical locating of the scenes of the film through revisiting exact locations where they were shot, to arrive at perspectives about the film’s meaning. In trekking through the Northern Territory, from Coolibah cattle station (named ‘Mongala’ in the film), by the Victoria River in the Northern Territory, to the Mary River at Marrakai, Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge), Mataranka, Ormiston Gorge, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs where the film was shot... and finally to New South Wales, where the film’s last scenes were reshot at Kanangra Walls, in the Blue Mountains – where Chauvel had the crew paint the entire sandstone cliffs red, to match the original Northern Territory landscape. Mills takes us on a fascinating excavation of the power of place within the Chauvels’ thinking.

Visiting the film’s locations helped me see more clearly what it has to say about territory and ownership, about who belongs in what space, who is put in their place, and who is displaced and replaced. (11)

It helped me understand that if Chauvel had to go to the actual locations to frame his narrative, then so did I. It was the only way I could find both his Jedda and mine. (20)

These twin strategies of evaluating the tone and shifts in genre contained within this film allow her to arrive at a third vantage point – which is the extent to which this film Jedda can be ‘reclaimed’ as an indigenous tract; as occupying some kind of factual or documentary stance encompassing historic 1950s attitudes towards aboriginality. By necessity, given the seismic shift in race politics since the release of this film in 1955, this book is by intent revisionist – to relocate/identify the meaning the film held then, and what, if anything, it may still have to say towards indigenous culture today.

Initially, this is a difficult film to like – there is scarcely a pot-hole of melodrama in its Northern Territory rough road that it does not joyously steer into. Chauvel seemed to consciously construct a genre melodrama, of fraught inter-racial love, which is then conjoined with a chase-Western of hunting a kidnapped girl through crocodile infested waters and mountainous ochre deserts. There is even a crocodile wrestling, rolling and knife scene that throws itself frenziedly into the Tarzan territory of early Johnny Weissmuller circa 1932. Puzzling, yet always seducing us visually, Chauvel jumps genre-fences throughout – although largely with a knowing tilt towards the Hollywood westerns of John Ford and Howard Hawks. If Utah was Ford’s vast desert backdrop, his cavernous film-set of the sublime in American cinema-lore, then Charles Chauvel (who had been a stuntman and Indian-extra in cowboy films in America in the 1920s) earnestly wanted to make his own Antipodean equivalence of a grand oater-opera.

And what was driving the western in the late 1940s? The arrival of the so called ‘psychological Western’ with The Gunfighter (1950) starring Gregory Peck, which ran in tandem with a repositioning of the Native American as other than dehumanised ‘red villain’. Films began to give shape to Cochise, and Geronimo in this identification with the ‘red man’ as noble hero; albeit of a presumed disappearing race; and the shifting status this accorded to the ‘half breed’ torn between two worlds. Notably in Duel in the Sun (1946) directed by King Vidor, and Broken Arrow (1950) with James Stewart as a sympathetic, more culturally respecting cowpoke, and Jeff Chandler playing Cochise. Duel in the Sun (1946) is the one immediate template Charles Chauvel came in the wake of, in its central plot of a half-breed Native American girl (Jennifer Jones) and miscegenation. Illicit sex between races was the glove thrown down to post-war society in its theme. The Searchers (1956) later followed this same tack, in this case of a white girl kidnapped by the Indians... essentially, it is inter-racial sexuality as the unspeakable sin driving Ethan... (John Wayne) on his murderous quest... but this film The Searchers was still a year or more away from release when
Jedda was being shot in the Northern Territory.

So – Jedda as a film arrives at a point of time when American cinema was questioning race; and realigning the cinema narratives of so-called dying cultures, in a general ‘greying’ of the white hat/black hat Western genre. Jedda consciously tapped into this sensibility, but it was by no means a position that Chauvel was a recent bandwagon convert to. After all, he began as a director, as Mills identifies… as a ‘locationist’; as a documentarian, in silents and then talking films shooting straight documentary, historical footage of Pitcairn Island. Chauvel’s ‘locationism’ is the use of landscape as unspoken protagonist – as it has been throughout his films, albeit in Tobruk, or Pitcairn Island, or the Northern Territory, where he worked in situ from place as not only a theatrical backdrop, but as the instigator of the story.

Most of his film In the Wake of the Bounty (1933) was shot as straight documentary, anthropological footage of the Pitcairn Islands and their inhabitants, before Chauvel decided to bring an acted ‘story’ into half of it, shot back in Bondi – by depicting a fanciful account of the rebellion led by Fletcher Christian against Bligh. In choosing a Tasmanian sailor with no film acting experience to play the lead, he happened upon Errol Flynn, giving him his first film role. Umbrella Entertainment released In the Wake of the Bounty (1933) for the first time on DVD on 2nd July, 2014. Umbrella are in the process of releasing all seven of Charles Chauvel’s films in 2013-14, culminating in Jedda, so this review and Mills’s book could not be more timely.

One of the things that has always weighing against the film Jedda has been its general unavailability – it was a film often discussed by film buffs in its absence, but not widely available. The NFSA gave it limited release on DVD in 2004, but this Umbrella release will make it far more comprehensively available.

The film itself received mixed reviews upon its release in January 1955 – and by mixed, a complete rift of for and against, which Mills notes in some detail. It was better received in Australia, where its Aboriginality was firmer in the culture – in America is seemed to present as its own halting ‘voodoo cowboy’ genre. Opened at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, the leading French film journal, Cahiers du Cinema wrote in review:

*The incredible puerility of the situations, dialogue and decoupage (editing technique) and the truly prodigious hideousness of the colour.* (73)

The Age newspaper however wrote in 1956 that it depicted the “remote, virtually uncharted regions and peoples of Northern Australia not as museum curiosities, but as living human beings.” (72) According to Mills:

*The leftist magazine Overland, on the other hand, thought it ‘thoroughly bad’ and noted that in addition to being ‘technically and artistically third-rate (it) peddles the worst kind of racist nonsense.’* (74)

Whilst, as Mills outlines, the night/day cinematography is unconvincing at points – the colour and landscape photography is overwhelmingly lush and elegiac, so it remains odd that critics were so heavily polarised against the film. Its narrativism, as Stuart Cunningham pointed out, was where the film’s stagey plot transitions grate… but the colour and look of the film is cinematically deeply elegant, and firmly resonant of the terrain. Ultimately, it is the reflections of racial politics in 1955 that determines our response to the film, and the conclusions we arrive at towards “the crude version of assimilation and of cultural integrity espoused by Sarah and Doug McMann respectively.” (74)
In terms of current views regarding the film’s politics, “For Indigenous scholar and actor Marcia Langton, however, the film is nothing but ‘a colonialist fantasy’ masking the truth of frontier brutality in melodrama.” (75) In fact, the eventual fate of the two leading characters, Jedda and Marbuk, conveniently ascribes to prevalent 1950s attitudes of the failure of the Aborigines to assimilate.

What Jane Mills does best in this book is to interrogate the relationship between cinema and geography, and apply a re-evaluation of what it is Jedda now conveys about Aboriginality, staged theatrically as it is against the red rock landscape, and the unfurling escarpments of the mythos of the great-chase Western that Chauvel was seeking to emulate. I think she offers intriguing reasons why the film was made in the way it was, without ever shrinking from some of Chauvel’s more dubious positions on race… and she does this without lauding the film, or making false claims for it. She astutely reinstates what it is the viewer can find through the prism of Jedda if you hold it up to the light, and give it the inspection it deserves.

Towards the end, Mills increasingly sees the character of the ‘half-caste’ stockman Joe as the key to unlocking the film’s ‘place’… it is Joe who after all is the narrator’s voice… it is Joe who is the uneven, twisting mirror of cockney voice becoming progressively more refined into a BBC modulated, thoroughly pukka British radio announcer’s voiceover, and who is our witness as narrator to Jedda’s tragic circumstances. He is also, as Mills introduces it, highly aware of “Knowing one’s place” and all that stems from slipping out of one’s assigned or rightful place… “Place is a powerful metaphor in Jedda.” (61)

Joe is “played by a white man in dark, if not blackface, he literally pales beside the Indigenous actors. He never has the centrality that by rights, or cinematic convention, should be his.” (64) Although he loves and expects to marry Jedda, whom he grew up with, and has the station-owner’s approval because he speaks, acts and embraces assimilated attitudes and is all but “coded as ‘white’” (65)… the viewer knows this love will be unrealised. Jedda’s passions are stirred by the primitive, full-blooded Aboriginal, Marbuk, who is pulling her away from her assumed whiteness, back to her primal Aboriginal origins.

The film Jedda is a narrative of competing notions of primitivism, of voodoo dances, and of assimilation versus separation. Mills concludes that: “The film’s greatest flaw is that we never hear an Indigenous viewpoint. It is not that I expect a film of this period to do this but it’s an absence that makes it difficult for me to truly love Jedda.” (70)

The book is littered with these types of trenchant observations from Mills, who writes as if peeling back the layers of a rather bitter onion, but throughout is constantly confronting her own preconceptions regarding Jedda, and consequently our own. For instance, she writes:

The film hides, often in full sight, a belief that if the land needs to be civilised and subject to white order and re-order, then so do its traditional owners and inhabitants. (61)

That statement above from Mills justifies both the book and the film, and the relevance of both to be opened out to this type of scrutiny. I dislike the film’s racial politics… but where else in Australian film has this celluloid Aboriginality been so manifestly, forefrontly displayed?

Jedda is very much about place, or rather being displaced against one’s will. To this end, Mills adds: “Location raises issues of dislocation and relocation that lay at the heart of discussions about Indigenous peoples in white Australia in the 1950s. It still does today.” (20) What Jane Mills isolates in this small book is therefore hugely important in terms of representations on film of indigenous people, and our ideas towards them.

The book requires Mills to repeatedly negotiate the ambivalence we wade into with the politics of Charles and Elsa
Chauvel, in their competing strategies towards the indigenous inhabitants – embodied in the voices of the two property owners – Doug and Sarah McMann. Doug is the voice of separatism – allow the Aborigines to go ‘walkabout’ and keep to their own cultural anchorage; superstitious, shadowy ritualising and all, and they will come back better workers – whilst Sarah is an assimilationist, earnestly believing she can ‘civilise’ the Aboriginality out of her adopted daughter, and the tragic trajectory of the film perhaps follows on from this one statement; which Mills quotes of Sarah McMann speaking to Jedda: “I want you to go on living like a white girl. Like my own daughter.” (37)

Neill Overton.

About the Author of the book on Jedda

Jane Mills is Associate Professor at the Journalism & Media Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. She is the Series Editor of Australian Screen Classics, a former Head of Screen Studies at AFTRS (1995-2000) and a founder-member of Watch on Censorship. She is the author of several books including The Money Shot: Cinema, Sin and Censorship (Pluto Press) and Loving and Hating Hollywood: Reframing Global and Local Cinemas (Allen & Unwin). She was Associate Professor of Communication in the School of Communication and Creative Industries at Charles Sturt University.