

Who's the Weird Mob Anyway? Assimilation and Authenticity in *They're A Weird Mob*

By Jessica Carniel

As one of the most well-known films about Australia's post-war immigration, Michael Powell's *They're A Weird Mob* (1966) is also one of the most complex and arguably problematic filmic representations of migrants' experiences. Nevertheless, it remains one of the very few mainstream Australian films from the time that in any way addresses immigration and settlement during this period of post-war nation building. Specifically, the film captures a moment in Australia's post-war history when immigrants were expected to assimilate into an Australian culture and society that was still imagined in terms of its colonial connections to Britain. Critical perspectives of *They're A Weird Mob* vary from those that decry its assimilationist overtones to those who are able to recognise in the film a form of inclusive 'benign multicultural tolerance'.¹ While the film remains problematic because of its assimilationist message, particularly from a current multiculturalist perspective, it must be appreciated as an important artefact of its era.

Based upon John O'Grady's comic novel of the same name, *They're A Weird Mob* depicts the humorous adventures of a newly arrived Italian migrant, Nino Culotta, played by Italian actor Walter Chiari. Expecting to take up a job as a sports writer for his cousin's Italian-language magazine *La Seconda Madre*, Nino arrives in Australia only to discover that the paper has folded and his cousin has absconded. The well-mannered writer soon finds work as a builder's labourer, and is befriended by his Australian co-workers who induct him into Australian social and cultural practices. Nino also falls in love with Kay, the daughter of an Anglo-Australian building constructor (played by iconic Australian actor Chips Rafferty), and the film culminates in a celebration of their impending marriage. The film is essentially a cross-cultural comedy of errors. Its humour derives from misunderstandings between the newly arrived migrant and the people and practices of the host society. While the film ostensibly plays upon ethnic or national differences, it is important to also consider the intersection of these with class differences.

Assimilation and multiculturalism: what's the difference?

Australia is commonly described as a multicultural nation. Multiculturalism was first introduced as a policy in 1973. It has continued to be the framework through which contemporary settlement policy is devised, even if there has been a movement away from the term by more recent governments, who have emphasised such terms as 'social cohesion' and 'inclusion', 'diversity' and 'harmony'. It is important to emphasise that multiculturalism is a settlement policy, not an immigration policy: it does not determine who comes into the country but rather what services and support is available to them upon arrival. In *They're A Weird Mob*, no such services were available to Nino and he is expected to completely assimilate to Australian culture.

Following the Second World War, Australia embarked upon a programme of mass immigration. The war had made Australia realise its physical and demographic vulnerability; it was a western country situated in the Asia-Pacific with a fairly negligible population. Furthermore, the country was in need of workers to support the development of new infrastructure, perhaps exemplified by the Snowy Hydro-electric Scheme, and its emerging manufacturing industry. Rather infamously, Australia's immigration programme was marked by its racially discriminatory policies. Despite the presence, albeit marginalised, of a non-white Indigenous population, Australia was imagined as a white nation and immigration policy was devised and implemented to support and sustain this desired national identity. Various practices and pieces of legislation, known collectively as the 'White Australia policy', restricted non-white immigration and established a hierarchy for desirable migrants based upon racial and cultural criteria. The British and other northern Europeans were at the top of this scale, whilst clearly non-white migrants, such as Asians and Africans, occupied its lower rungs. Italians and Greeks fell somewhere in the middle yet were the two most significant migrant groups arriving in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s. At the time that *They're A Weird Mob* is set, the White Australia policy had already begun what Gwenda Tavan calls its 'long, slow death'.² The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the foundational piece of legislation for the policy, was replaced in 1958 by the Migration Act, which still forms the basis of Australian immigration legislation today. This shift in legislation saw the removal of many discriminatory practices, but was in fact just one of many steps towards the final, official abolition of the White Australia policy in 1973.

While the White Australia policy sought to control the racial composition of Australian society, Australia's policy of assimilation sought to control its

cultural identity and practices. Under assimilationism, migrants were expected to abandon the accoutrements of their previous ethnic and national identities, such as language and cultural practices, and to embrace Australian culture completely. At the time in which *They're A Weird Mob* is set, assimilationism had partially given way to an intermediary policy of integration, which acknowledged acculturation as a more gradual process; migrants were still expected to learn English and to participate in Australian culture and society as much as possible, while the expectation of full assimilation was delayed until at least the second generation.

As an Italian, Nino Culotta represents an acceptable face of white immigration, albeit of a darker shade of pale; however, he should not be read as typical or exemplary of the average Italian migrant during the 1960s. While Italian immigrants ranged across the socio-economic spectrum, the vast majority were from rural and working-class backgrounds, as they were the ones most in need of new economic opportunities, and entered into comparable labour roles upon arrival in Australia. The character of Nino Culotta is part of the educated Italian middle class and comes to Australia with the intention of continuing work in his white-collar profession of sports journalism; in a sense, Nino's acculturation is as much a question of class as it is national or ethnic culture. Certainly, Nino's education and urbane manners are an important part, if not the entire basis, of the overall joke: it is portrayed as ridiculous that a continental European from a country renowned for its high culture should be expected to assimilate into the decidedly more lowbrow cultural milieu into which he is unexpectedly thrust.

This disjuncture between the urbane middle-class migrant and his new working-class friends highlights the ambiguity of who exactly comprises the 'weird mob' of the film's title; it encourages us to question whether it is the foreign migrant or the culture and society to which he has migrated that is really weird. As Roland Caputo and Adrian Danks argue: "The 'weird mob' of the film's title refers not to the migrant but to the very strangeness of Australian culture as perceived via the gaze of a foreigner."³ Arguably, it is director Michael Powell's status as a non-Australian that magnifies this for the audience; that is, Powell's lens is as much the gaze of the foreigner as that of Nino himself. Despite the imagined Britishness of Australian culture at the time, Powell's own Britishness allows him to distil the uniqueness and strangeness of Australian culture.

The nationality of *They're A Weird Mob's* director, as with other aspects of the production, has caused occasional debate about whether the film can in fact be classified as Australian and, given Powell's foreignness, about the particular perspective it is taking of Australian culture. The conflation of Powell's and Nino's gazes as both foreign and classed together with the portrayal of Australian people as the 'weird mob' may suggest a mocking or

Will the real Nino Culotta please stand up?

The film *They're A Weird Mob* is based upon Nino Culotta's 1957 book of the same name. Culotta is, however, not a real person; he is the invention and nom de plume used by Irish Australian humorist John O'Grady for *They're A Weird Mob* and its subsequent sequels including *Cop This Lot and Gone Fishin'*. Initially the book was marketed under Culotta's authorship, but the publishers strategically revealed the truth several months after the book's initial release.¹ Despite – or perhaps because of – this, the book went on to be a popular best-seller and perhaps one of the best-known Australian comic novels of the time. David Carter suggests that O'Grady's Nino Culotta is a fairly benign form of the literary hoax quite common in Australia, such as the Ern Malley and Helen Demidenko/Darville affairs.²

- 1 David Carter and John O'Grady, 'Nino Culotta: popular authorship, duplicity and celebrity', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2004, p.56.
- 2 Carter and O'Grady, p.56.

superior tone by the film-maker. It must be remembered, however, that the film is based upon the novel of the same name by Australian humorist John O'Grady. While O'Grady cannot lay claim to an authentic Italian migrant voice in either the book or the film, for which he contributed to the screenplay together with Richard Imrie (the Anglicised pseudonym taken on by Powell's long-time collaborator Emric Pressburger), we can and indeed should view him as an authentic Australian voice; that is, O'Grady is himself one of the 'weird mob' whose culture is actually at the centre of the film. Between O'Grady's voice as an Australian insider and Powell's gaze as a foreigner, the film does provide an insight into life for new and old Australians in the 1960s.

Arguably, Nino's Italian ethnicity becomes almost peripheral to the narrative; he is but a cipher to represent 'new Australians' in general at a time when Italians happened to be one of the more significant and well-known groups. Interestingly, while the film is undoubtedly assimilationist in its overall message, its portrayal of migrants and Australian immigration is overwhelmingly positive. For example, the scene on the ferry in which a group of Italian migrants is harassed by a drunken Australian man functions to represent the man's cultural intolerance as itself intolerable behaviour. This is juxtaposed against the behaviour of Nino and the other Italian migrants, and must also be compared to the acceptance offered to Nino by his workmates, even as they strive to teach him how to be Australian.

Ultimately, *They're A Weird Mob* is clearly a pro-assimilation film yet it is simultaneously a film about welcoming migrants into Australia, albeit conditionally. While it does not necessarily offer any nuanced insight into the specific experiences of many migrants who came to Australia at that time, it offers a rare and often humorous glimpse into Australian society in the 1960s, prior to the advent of multiculturalism as both a policy and as an everyday part of Australian life.

Further Reading

- Caputo, Rolando and Adrian Danks, 'They're a weird mob' in Geoff Mayer and Keith Beattie (eds.), *24 Frames: The Cinema of Australia and New Zealand*, Wallflower Press, London, 2007, pp.91–99.
- Carter, David and John O'Grady, 'Nino Culotta: popular authorship, duplicity and celebrity', *Australian Literary Studies*, 21: 4, 2004, p.56.
- Hoorn, Jeanette, 'Michael Powell's *They're a Weird Mob*: dissolving the "undigested fragments" in the Australian body politic', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 17: 2, 2003, pp.159–176.
- Tavan, Gwenda, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2005.

Notes

- 1 Roland Caputo and Adrian Danks, 'They're a weird mob' in Geoff Mayer and Keith Beattie (eds.), *24 Frames: The Cinema of Australia and New Zealand*, Wallflower Press, London, 2007, p.99.
- 2 Gwenda Tavan, *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2005, passim.
- 3 Caputo and Danks, p.99.