

## Racial Tragedy, Australian History, and the New Australian Cinema: Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* Revisited

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### Abstract

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) broke ground in its native country for dealing bluntly with one of the most tragic aspects of Australian history: the racist treatment of the aboriginal population. Adapted faithfully from the 1972 novel by Thomas Keneally, the film concerns a young man of mixed race in turn-of-the-century Australia who feels torn between the values and aspirations of white society, on the one hand, and his aboriginal roots, on the other, and who ultimately takes to violence against his perceived white oppressors. This essay re-views *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* from the following angles: its historical context; its place in the New Australian Cinema; its graphic violence; and the subsequent careers of the film's director, Fred Schepisi, and its star, Tommy Lewis.

**Keywords:** *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*; Fred Schepisi; Thomas Keneally; New Australian Cinema; racism and colonialism

Prior to the late 1970s, Australia was something of a cinematic backwater. Occasionally, Hollywood and British production companies would turn up to use the country as a backdrop for films that ranged from the classic (*On the Beach* [1959]) to the egregious (*Ned Kelly* [1970], starring Mick Jagger). But the local movie scene, for the most part, was sleepy and unimaginative and very few Australian films traveled abroad. Then, without warning, Australia suddenly experienced an efflorescence of imaginative filmmaking, as movies such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), and *Breaker Morant* (1980) began to be shown all over the world. Hitherto unknown talents from behind the camera (including Peter Weir and Bruce Beresford) and before it (most notably Mel Gibson and Judy Davis) became overnight sensations and were snatched up by Hollywood.

Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) is one film from this period that had a significant impact on the shaping of Australian cinema. In American

history there are Indians and blacks. In Australian history, the social place and function of both those races are filled by one race, the black aborigines. Like the Indians of the United States, they were the first inhabitants; like American Indians, hundreds of thousands of them were slaughtered in the name of “manifest destiny”; like blacks in the U.S., they remain the largest, cheapest, needed-cum-hated labor force. These aspects are the ground of *Jimmie Blacksmith*, the second feature directed (and written) by Schepisi, who, along with Weir, Phillip Noyce, Beresford, Tim Burstall, George Miller, and Gillian Armstrong, was one of the key directors of the New Australian Cinema of the 1970s and early 1980s.

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* broke ground in its native country for dealing bluntly with one of the most tragic aspects of Australian history: the racist treatment of the aboriginal population, which consisted of five million people before Westerners arrived in 1788 and numbers only several hundred thousand today. (In Tasmania, white Australians used to run aborigines off cliffs; in New South Wales, where *Jimmie Blacksmith* takes place, they herded them together and shot them like bandits.) Adapted faithfully from the 1972 novel by Thomas Keneally (subsequently the author of *Schindler’s List* [1982]), the film concerns a young man of mixed race, or “half-caste,” in turn-of-the-century Australia who feels torn between the values and aspirations of white society, on the one hand, and his aboriginal roots, on the other, and who ultimately takes to violence against his perceived white oppressors. (The narrative was inspired by the true story of Jimmy Governor, a half-aboriginal Australian of the late nineteenth century who went on a rampage and killed seven whites.)

It is 1900 and Australia is on the verge of Federation, but relations with England and the world are of no importance compared to the greed for property on the part of white Australians: over and over in this film we see fences going up whereby the whites appropriate the natives’ land; beyond that, there are legal, social, and economic fences that keep the aborigines out and down, their once tribal, nomadic existence reduced to subsistence in squalid shanty towns. The product of a white man’s visit to a shanty-town whore, Jimmie Blacksmith is one of these natives, and is lucky—or unlucky—enough to have been raised and educated by a Methodist minister, Mr. Neville, and his wife. While the aboriginal community views him without prejudice, white society sees him only as a “darky,” a “nigger,” and a “black bastard.”

As a young adult, Jimmie is sent out with a reference letter from the minister to seek employment. The racist Australians he encounters, however, do not view him as a peer, and he is only able to secure menial labor jobs such as fence-builder or shit-shoveler. At every place he works, he is cheated out of his wages and driven away with violence when he tries to collect his money. Nonetheless, Jimmie tries very hard to be a “good boy,” takes his orders and does his work, suffers his exploitations and insults, and cheerily slogs on; indeed, he is bright in addition to being hardworking, and he is not naïve—he expects to be cheated and insulted, even as, like all black workers in Australia, he expects (however unwillingly) to have to share his meager wages with otherwise idle relatives. For a while, Jimmie is employed as a police-tracker by a constable who makes regular raids on a settlement of aborigines living in poverty and advanced alcoholism. There, on horseback, Jimmie must club innocent aborigines or stand by as the drunken constable brutally kills a black suspect, but his shame at such “collaborationist” duties forces him to leave this job.

He eventually lands work at a sheep-shearing station, where conditions are somewhat more tolerable than he previously experienced. He also has a quickie sexual encounter with a white kitchen servant (who has also been enjoying carnal favors from the other men of the station and is thus half servant/half slut—and herself a metaphoric

half-caste). When she becomes pregnant, Jimmie marries her. However, the arrival of the baby—a completely white baby—shows that he was not the father and that his nobility was in vain. (The minister's wife had encouraged him to marry a white farm girl; by the time his grandchildren came, she told him soothingly, they would be only one-eighth black.) Jimmie cherishes his wife and child, yet buffets continue until a point where he and his family have nothing to eat and the farmer for whom he works, Jack Newby, denies him credit as a stratagem not only for separating Jimmie from his white wife, but also for driving away Jimmie's freeloading black relatives.



But this time, he finally snaps and is at last abused over the edge into murder—mass murder. Jimmie's "declaration of war" against the whites is based on what he overhears much earlier about the British having declared war against the Boers in South Africa. When he asks what "declaring war" means, a skeptic answers, "It means you can officially go in and shoot the buggers . . . till they agree with you or leave you alone." This is what Jimmie wants (though the parallel is not belabored by the film), and all the drive he had exerted to attain the white world he now turns to destroying it. For the Newbys represent what Jimmie wanted a wife for in the first place—he wanted to be them. And so, of course, they enrage him most.

Using an axe, he murders the wife and daughters of his employer. And we realize that only when they bleed do these excessively white, pink, blond, and obtuse beings acquire full humanity, and that only through killing them can Jimmie in any sense, however misguided and horrible, reach them. (Schepisi realizes that the true horror is not that racists are personally monstrous, though some may well be: their cruelty is especially ugly on account of its impersonality, the fact that they never see anything but the color of a black man's skin.) A black uncle who is with him joins in the killing, not so much out of fury as loyalty. They flee, accompanied by Jimmie's full-black half-brother, Mort, who had been trailing him throughout his journeys, and now joins Jimmie as the latter revisits (with gun in hand) all of those who wronged him in the past.

Mort is something like the noble (Indian) savage or Negro of American literature, but he's not a warrior or a mighty hunter. There's nothing overtly heroic about him; he's essentially passive and relaxed—a loyal, easygoing bum in ragged tweeds. This bum makes us see what the Europeans have destroyed in Australia, for he's the simplest yet the most civilized person in the movie. The tribalism he accepts

means that he doesn't have to prove himself, like the tormented Jimmie: he is part of everything. To wit, Mort has nothing yet feels rich. Jimmie suffers from the perils of Christian individualism; he wants respect, property, *and* whiteness, and his failure to achieve them rots and twists him. It's Jimmie, rather than a full-blooded aborigine, who explodes in violence because he has tried the individualistic white way and been rejected. His tragedy is thus to be caught between two worlds.

Soon the countryside is aflame with the horror of these two aboriginal serial killers, Jimmie and Mort, on the loose; ironically, a black auxiliary policeman helps the white posse track them just as Jimmie himself was once a turncoat. He and Mort, for no clear reason, take a white male schoolteacher as a hostage for a short period, but this hostage becomes something of a burden, falling lethally ill in the outback. Mort agrees to take him back to his village but in doing so, he is discovered and killed. Jimmie, alone in the wilderness, is left to outrun the hostile society that never wanted him as an equal but now only desires him as a gift for the gallows. The end of Jimmie, with half his lower jaw torn away by a bullet, captured in a convent (and handed over by nuns, from whom one might have expected charity), carted off to jail with soldiers protecting him from a mob (and with the hangman peering through a peephole in the door to his cell, speculating on the resistance of his unusually developed neck muscles), then, on the night before he is hanged (a hanging delayed until *after* the ceremonies surrounding Federation, so as not to embarrass the proud young nation by reminding it of what it had done to the natives), talking in his cell with the minister of his boyhood, who says he takes the blame on himself for what has happened—all this iron grimness is suffused by the sense that death has finally caught up with a man who has been dead for some time.

Dead, finally, because of the maddening inconsistency in Australian society in the treatment of aborigines—kindness from some whites, injustice from others—that drives the aborigine to distraction and destruction (not least because the original white settlers of Australia themselves were former pariahs, convicts who had been cast out of England.) This inconsistency is visually highlighted during the scene in which the minister, Neville, visits Jimmie on death row. Neville and Jimmie are shot in compassionate close-up, whereas the hangman, Hyberry, evaluates Jimmie's neck muscles in a medium long shot to which the peephole supplies a natural iris effect. This is obviously an uninvolved, indeed unfeeling, way of shooting such a scene, and a manner of shooting that is only intensified by Hyberry's earlier being told he will be made a Member of the Order of the British Empire for his executioner's services.

Like Schepisi's 1976 debut film, *The Devil's Playground* (a painstaking reconstruction of the director's growing up in a Catholic seminary), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is set in Australia's past, at the time when the country can be said to have achieved nationhood: roughly, from the 1890s to the end of World War I. Period films such as this were at the very center of the Australian feature-film revival. Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is popularly credited with beginning the trend and establishing many of the recurrent features of the genre, such as its basis in literature, its picturesque treatment of the rural landscape, and its thematic emphasis on institutions and education and how they are often inimical to individual personality and positive self-identity. (See, in particular, the female experience as charted in Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* or Beresford's *The Getting of Wisdom*.)

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, like *The Devil's Playground*, fits broadly within this form: for example, white society with its material aspirations, which the Reverend Neville encourages Jimmie to pursue, is nothing if not a constricting force that severs the protagonist's indigenous roots (something underlined by the fact that his development in this society is seen as an "education"). However, in certain crucial

respects Schepisi's film goes further than many of its contemporaries in exploring serious issues in an intelligent, uncompromising way while eschewing the self-conscious, European artiness of a film like Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. In the process, *Jimmie Blacksmith* emerges as an intense and bleak story of the inevitability of violent confrontation between segregated races.



The style of the film, particularly its editing and *mise-en-scène*, are perfectly attuned to this central thematic core. The opening, pre-credit sequence that cuts between the young Jimmie undergoing his tribal initiation in the bush—an initiation that includes scarring of the chest but is followed by Jimmie's difficult return to the minister's house in Western clothes—and the Reverend Neville at home bemoaning the boy's unexplained absence, perfectly lays out this style. The disparity and distance between the races, between the whites and the aborigines, is immediately underlined in the contrast between the cluttered, sterile, and materialistic indoors of the Neville household, on the one hand (filled with crockery similar to the kind later smashed as Jimmie commits his first murders, of the Newbys), and the natural, open expanses of the bush, on the other. To reinforce this point, there is a later scene at the Nevilles' dinner table in which Jimmie, on the eve of going out to make his way in the world, thanks the reverend and his wife for his "education." In one extended sequence shot, the camera begins by framing the meal on the table before tilting up to the reverend (dominant in the center of the screen and at the head of the table) and then slowly tracking out to tightly compose the scene from a distance through the doorway, with Jimmie hemmed-in on the left side of the screen. Such a composition underlines Jimmie's social entrapment by visually constricting him within the frame, which is dominated by the reverend and all he represents.

As in Keneally's source novel, the film's narration, though ostensibly omniscient or unrestricted, aligns itself closely with the titular protagonist's mindset and his experience of the two communities between which he is torn. Once again, it is the *mise-en-scène* that underlines Jimmie's experience: the aforementioned scene at the Nevilles' dinner table contrasts with many exterior scenes where extreme long shots repeatedly frame Jimmie as dwarfed by the landscape around him, graphically foregrounding the fact that, unlike true aborigines, Jimmie cannot live on the land and achieve liberation or freedom within it. (The insistent use of the telephoto lens, which flattens people out against a background brought closer while they seem only specks against it, makes this point.) Like a white man, Jimmie's specific wish is to own land, and such a white desire to conquer and dominate the landscape (one of the key myths—

or problems—of Australian nationhood) crucially separates him from his spiritual roots as represented in the opening scene's tribal initiation. Other features of the film also reinforce this idea of segregation and of Jimmie as homeless in the wilderness: Jimmie's job constructing fences underscores his sense of separation and his desire to possess his own land; and the sporadic cutaways to close-ups of insects, worms, lizards, and snakes (reminiscent of such shots in Nicolas Roeg's seminal *Walkabout* [1970]) connote a sense of the hostility of the land—or, conversely, the idea that full aboriginals are so much a part of the land that they see things in it, animals and plants, which whites especially just do not perceive at all—through which Jimmie passes, a land as alien to him as to the middle-class Caucasian schoolchildren of Roeg's film.

Conversely, while the film's narration can be seen to work in this faux-subjective manner, it simultaneously maintains a largely objective camera and editing style for much of the picture's duration, with almost no point-of-view shots. By denying Jimmie any overt look, any self-generated gaze, Schepisi thereby figuratively connotes his fundamental lack of social agency and standing, his powerlessness. The one important point-of-view shot allowed Jimmie occurs when he is captured and carried from the convent while being harangued by whites. In other words, he is privileged with a look only at the moment that the looks *at him* by those higher in society than he (with their status visually underlined by having Jimmie look up at them) are at their most pronounced. Nothing works for Jimmie, yet the short or even quite short scenes with which Schepisi puts together his movie, the distance between the camera and the nasty events depicted, the very indistinctness of the sound in certain scenes (I do not mean the hard-to-understand accents, white and black), the confusion in and around Jimmie—all this militates against sentimentality in the film, and creates instead a sense of pervasive injustice in almost impersonal terms. Indeed, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is assembled like a mosaic—one whose brief, nervous, densely packed scenes function as nearly self-sufficient vignettes etched in bitterness or grim irony, and whose cumulative effect is to achieve an aura of helplessness and ineluctable doom.

Violence? Yes, *Jimmie Blacksmith* gets to a lot of it, with axes and guns, though no more explicit than necessary. Compare these killings with those in a contemporaneous, violence-peddling film like Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980). The razors in this picture are the reasons for its existence: everything before and after is trumped up with glossy psychologizings, to make the razors possible. Nothing is trumped up in *Jimmie Blacksmith*: the violence is grounded and ordained, and Schepisi is careful not to revel in it. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," says the Bible. De Palma's treasure is razors; Schepisi's treasure is Jimmie. Why? Because *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is only nominally about a spontaneous act of violence; its true center is the destruction of a race.

The central power of the film naturally rests in the character of Jimmie Blacksmith, and Schepisi took something of a gamble by casting an untried, nineteen-year-old actor in the leading role, Tommy Lewis (who, like Jimmie, is of mixed race). Lewis is a handsome and virile presence who looks great on the screen, but he also imbues his role with an astonishing depth of emotion. Riding the emotional gamut from great joy (the scene where he performs the chant—actually an aboriginal dance, not a song—to celebrate his baby's birth) to utter despair (his final humiliation, shivering and chained in a cold jail cell, his face disfigured from the gunshot wound), Lewis gives a performance that is nothing less than extraordinary for a film debut. He carries the film, and is enchanting, graceful, and deeply moving in doing so; his strength and beauty in the part, his hatred of *everything* after he starts killing, his numbness after the jaw wound, are all like pure movements in music. (Sadly, Lewis's subsequent film career

has consisted primarily of supporting or guest roles in Australian films, most notably in John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* [2005].)

With a shooting schedule of only fifteen weeks, and locations requiring that the crew travel 5,000 miles, Schepisi had the job of blending a large company of the finest white stage and screen performers with aborigines—most of them non-professionals who were trained while the film was being made. He succeeded, and then some. Every part, without the smallest exception, is well cast and acted. Ray Barrett, a brutal policeman, Peter Carroll, the schoolteacher whom Jimmie takes as a hostage, and Steve Dodds, who plays Jimmie's black uncle, do particularly clean-lined work. They are professional actors. Freddy Reynolds, who plays Jimmie's black half-brother, is not a professional actor, yet he, too, is wonderful. This speaks to the casting by Schepisi's wife, Rhonda, and of course to the innate gifts of these performers, as well. But, for me, the work Schepisi did with his actors, professional or not, is one of the strongest talents that he shows in this film. I don't expect ever to forget Reynolds' ease in nature, the wilting of hate in him through natural sunniness; or the stunning moment after the first murders when Dodds sits shivering, or his brief speech in the dock after his sentence.

What seems especially remarkable in this thesis film is the suggestion of concealed lives in several of the white characters—vicious, patronizing, lordly, or politely obtuse—who shape Jimmie's irreversible action. Kept at middle distance from them, so that the youth's tragedy will be foremost, you feel that an entire film could be made from any of the participants who impose themselves briefly and pass on. Not without their complexities, they exhibit gruffness that is countered by grudging bits of fairness, just as their decency is shot through with arrogance, stupidity, and greed. We can see how these former British pariahs and their descendants need to assert themselves at the expense of someone else—the aborigines beneath them. Credit for these teasing inferences belongs equally to Schepisi and to the excellent actors and actresses with whom the Australian cinema is abundantly stocked.

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* was the first Australian film to be featured in official competition at the Cannes Festival, in addition to being the first Australian feature to treat the "problem" of the aborigine as something more than exotic cultural baggage. In Australia, however, the film was not a box-office success when it was released in 1978, and it received only an equivocal critical reception. Audiences were particularly uncomfortable with its presentation of Australia's troubled racial history and with the fact that in the film an aboriginal Australian was killing white people (especially with an axe). Overseas, though, *Jimmie Blacksmith* had more success (although fourteen minutes of footage were deleted for the international version). It opened in the United States in the fall of 1980 and its popularity was such that it enabled Schepisi to immigrate to Hollywood, where he went on to direct such films as *Iceman* (1982), *Roxanne* (1987), and *The Russia House* (1990). The critics Pauline Kael and John Simon were effusive in their praise for *Jimmie Blacksmith*, while Schepisi was invited to Cannes in a continuation of that Festival's love affair with New Australian Cinema, which had been initiated by Ken Hannam's archetypal *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975). Hannam's picture was selected for screening at the Directors' Fortnight (an independent program presented in parallel with the Cannes Film Festival) in 1975, as was *The Devil's Playground* in 1976. By 1978 there were twenty Australian films at Cannes, including *Jimmie Blacksmith*.

Following this accomplishment, several new Australian films were significant hits at the Cannes Festival in the next two years, including Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* in 1979 and Beresford's *Breaker Morant* in 1980. Both these pictures gained American distribution based in part on the strength of their European festival reception,

and their respective European success itself was built on the foundation of the breakthrough achieved by *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. It truly was an Important Film, even if its reception in Australia prompted Schepisi to move to America to continue his career. His next film may have been the forgettable western *Barbarosa* (1982), but no one who sees *Jimmie Blacksmith* will forget it: it is with this stunning, heartbreaking work that Schepisi made, and will keep, his reputation.

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### **Credits: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978)**

Director: Fred Schepisi. Screenplay: Fred Schepisi, from the 1972 novel of the same name by Thomas Keneally. Cinematographer: Ian Baker. Editor: Brian Kavanagh. Music: Bruce Smeaton. Production Designer: Wendy Dickson. Costume Designer: Bruce Finlayson.

Running time: 108 minutes. Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Tommy Lewis (Jimmie Blacksmith), Freddy Reynolds (Mort Blacksmith), Ray Barrett (Farrell), Jack Thompson (Reverend Neville), Angela Punch (Gilda Marshall), Steve Dodds (Tabidgi), Peter Carroll (McCready), Ruth Cracknell (Mrs. Heather Newby), Don Crosby (Jack Newby).

### **Feature Filmography: Fred Schepisi (born 1939)**

*The Devil's Playground* (1976)

*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978)

*Barbarosa* (1982)

*Roxanne* (1987)

*A Cry in the Dark* (1988)

*The Russia House* (1990)

*Six Degrees of Separation* (1993)

*The Eye of the Storm* (2011)

*Words and Pictures* (2013)

*Andorra* (2017)



**Filmography: Key Works of the New Australian Cinema**

*Walkabout* (1971), directed by Nicolas Roeg  
*The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), directed by Peter Weir  
*Petersen* (1974), directed by Tim Burstall  
*Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), directed by Peter Weir  
*Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), directed by Ken Hannam  
*The Devil's Playground* (1976), directed by Fred Schepisi  
*Don's Party* (1976), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*The Last Wave* (1977), directed by Peter Weir  
*Backroads* (1977), directed by Phillip Noyce  
*Summerfield* (1977), directed by Ken Hannam  
*The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), directed by Fred Schepisi  
*Newsfront* (1978), directed by Phillip Noyce  
*Mad Max* (1979), directed by George Miller  
*My Brilliant Career* (1979), directed by Gillian Armstrong  
*The Odd Angry Shot* (1979), directed by Tom Jeffrey  
*The Plumber* (1979), directed by Peter Weir  
*Breaker Morant* (1980), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*Manganinnie* (1980), directed by John Honey  
*Gallipoli* (1981), directed by Peter Weir  
*Puberty Blues* (1981), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*Heatwave* (1982), directed by Phillip Noyce  
*The Man from Snowy River* (1982), directed by George T. Miller  
*Monkey Grip* (1982), directed by Ken Cameron  
*We of the Never Never* (1982), directed by Igor Auzins  
*Lonely Hearts* (1982), directed by Paul Cox  
*The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), directed by Peter Weir  
*Careful, He Might Hear You* (1983), directed by Carl Schultz  
*My First Wife* (1984), directed by Paul Cox  
*Burke & Wills* (1985), directed by Graeme Clifford  
*The Fringe Dwellers* (1986), directed by Bruce Beresford  
*The Year My Voice Broke* (1987), directed by John Duigan  
*The Lighthorsemen* (1987), directed by Simon Wincer  
*A Cry in the Dark* (1988), directed by Fred Schepisi  
*Emerald City* (1988), directed by Michael Jenkins.

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