# Making Race Mean

The limits of interpretation in the case of
Australian Aboriginality in films
and television programs

by

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## Abstract

Academic work on Aboriginality in popular media has, understandably, been largely written in defensive registers. Aware of horrendous histories of Aboriginal murder, dispossession and pitying understanding at the hands of settlers, writers are worried about the effects of raced representation; and are always concerned to identify those texts which might be labelled racist. In order to make such a search meaningful, though, it is necessary to take as axiomatic certain propositions about the functioning of films: that they 'mean' in particular and stable ways, for example; and that sophisticated reading strategies can fully account for the possible ways a film interacts with audiences. These sophisticated readings can then by rendered as ontological statements, prefaced by such non-negotiable phrases as: *'Jedda* is....'

This thesis suggests that such approaches fail to take account of the work involved in audiences making sense of these texts. Although the possible uses of a film or a television program are not infinite, neither is it possible to make final statements about a text's status. Rather, it is necessary to take account of various limits which are placed on the interpretations of texts, for different audiences at different moments. Moving the focus of attention away from feature films (which have traditionally encouraged the idea of a spectator constructed by the text) to include television programs (which have proven more difficult to write into such a project) facilitates this move to an understanding of Aboriginal representation more concerned with the work involved in its interpretations.

This thesis addresses three main areas. Firstly, favoured modes of

spectatorship validate particular practices of consumption.  These have implications for the readings which will be made of Aboriginality. Secondly, sets of validated intertexts circulated as 'genres' and 'oeuvres' enable meaning to be made in particular ways.  Finally, secondary texts (including academic work) which explicitly purport to explicate films and television programs provide frameworks within which interpretation can be made.  Each of these limits works to close down the radical polysemy of television and film texts, enabling meaning to be made of them, and of the Aboriginality they purport to represent.

# Contents

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And always, thanks to my husband, Dr John William Sentry, who made me the man I am today, and without whom, none of this would have been, etc etc etc.

Declaration

I certify that this work is the result of my own study and investigation, and that wherever possible I acknowledge the authors of references used, and of views expressed which are other than my own.

I also certify that none of this work has been previously submitted, nor is concurrently submitted, in candidature for any other degree.

Alan McKee

# Introduction

# *Making Race Mean*

Today, *Jedda* is sickening, and at the same time, laughable in its racism
(Marcia Langton, 1993: 47)

...the most successful representation of Aborigines by Whites in
Australian cinema is still Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* of 1954 (Robert
Hodge and Vijay Mishra, 1991: 64)

## 1

Who's right and who's wrong?  Marcia Langton is a respected
Aboriginal academic whose paper for the AFC, *Well I Heard it on the
Radio...*(1993) remains one of the most serious attempts to address
the representation of Aboriginality in Australian films; Bob Hodge
and Vijay Mishra are well-known in the fields of anthropology and
post-colonial writing, with no lack of theoretical credibility in such
areas.  But the quotations given above cannot both be correct, in their
own terms and at the same time. *Jedda* cannot simultaneously be,
ontologically and without qualification, 'sickening...in its racism' and
'the most successful representation of Aborigines by Whites in
Australian cinema'.  These quotations are chosen to draw attention
to the dominant mode of writing on Aboriginality in Australian film
and television.  Academic work on this subject has been, and
continues to be, assertive and uncompromising, concerned with 'the
*correctness* of representation' (Muecke, 1992: 12).  Statements are
made without qualification; readings are presented as inescapable
and final.  In this arena, there is no space for uncertain probabilities:

interpretations need not be hedged around with maybes, assertions of localism or qualifiers of effect. Declarations about representations of the Aboriginal are final and non-negotiable: they state that *'Jedda is...'*, and *'Jedda isn't...'*. Each film, in this approach, has an unarguable and stable status that might not be apparent to the casual viewer, but reveals itself to the sophisticated reader. A film might not be explicitly racist, for example — but underneath, it 'really' is, and a sufficiently close reading will reveal this fact (David Bordwell has referred to this methodology as 'symptomatic interpretation' — Bordwell, 1989: 71).

This thesis suggests that representations of Aboriginality in popular culture's texts might in fact be less involved in projecting themselves and their ideologies onto audiences than has previously been recognised. It is concerned less with the correctness of representation than by the processes by which representation and interpretation are possible: the ways in which these texts make race into a meaningful, a significant, quantity.

## 2

The thesis does not seek to address anything as grandiose as 'Aboriginality and Australian media'. It is necessary, in order to produce a manageable area of investigation for this work, first to produce a practicable object of study. The vague articulation of two vast terms ('Aboriginality'; 'Australian media') covers writing on a range of quite distinct topics, collapsing together white and Aboriginal texts, industrial situations, audiences and textual representations. Academic work in this area, for example, has investigated the 'effects' of white media on Aboriginal audiences (Katz, 1977; Thompson, 1983; Snow and Noble, 1986; Christie, 1989; Hughes, 1995); it has discussed Aboriginal audiences' uses of media texts (Michaels, 1988b; Cubitt, 1993; Bostock, 1993); while Aboriginal broadcasting from communities such as Yuendumu and Ernabella remains a focus of considerable academic fascination[1]. Industrial

issues around Aboriginal access to the means of representation have
been a necessary focus of writing (Hutton, 1980; Lander, 1983;
Mackinolty and Duffy, 1987; Dunbar, 1993); while the writing of Eric
Michaels on aspects of 'The Aboriginal Invention of Television'
must be noted as mapping a considerable academic area of its own [2].

Aware of the number of quite different topics and arguments
involved in this broad area, the current thesis addresses itself quite
explicitly to one area: the production of Aboriginalities in settler texts
of film and television.  A refusal to address Aboriginal broadcasting
in this work is thus not an oversight, but rather a conscious decision
to turn away from an area which has already been the focus of a good
deal of critical attention, and instead to address texts which have been
concomitantly glanced over with vague assertions of absence.  Very
few of the works considered in this thesis have previously been the
focus of sustained critical attention.


3

While the production of Aboriginality in settler texts of film and
television has been the focus of some attention, only a rigidly
circumscribed canon of works has been taken as worthy of critical
interest.  In particular, the grouping of 'film and television texts' of
Aboriginality is an unequal yoking — in terms of critical attention,
television is by far the less prominent medium.  Apart from some
writing on the Aboriginal presence in news programs, which has
proven congruent with wider sociological concerns about the
ideological work of that form (Jennett, 1983; Mickler, 1992; Goodall,
1993); and tangential comments in writing on other issues (Tulloch
and Moran, 1986;  Muecke, 1992; Martin, 1993), almost no work has
been published on Aboriginality in settler television texts.  Glancing
mentions (Walsh, 1979; Molnar, 1994) worry about absence and
tokenism, but there is little in the way of more sustained analysis.
Indeed, the material gathered by Heather Goodall, Andrew
Jakubowicz et al (1990) for the Office of Multicultural Affairs

(published as Jakubowicz, ed, 1994) is the only substantial body of work devoted to this subject (although, once again, this includes Aboriginality not as a central focus, but as part of a wider concern with 'ethnicity' on television). Addressing a range of television representation — *The Great Outdoors, A Country Practice, Home and Away* and adverts, as well the more typical news and current affairs genres — this work provides a series of worried readings which suggest ways in which Aboriginality in each of these programs might be understood negatively (no regular soap characters, no Aboriginal images in adverts, Ernie Dingo only presents stories associated with nature in his travel show, and so on).

Without wishing to follow the tendency to assert absences where there are none, there is very little work done on Aboriginality in Australian settler television.

# 4

Writing on Aboriginalities in Australian film has a more developed history. Andrew Pike in 1977 presents the first substantial survey of Aboriginal images, providing summary narrative interpretations of films through the history of Australian cinema  In its attention to earlier films in their portrayal of Aboriginality (even if each individual film forms only a brief element of his survey) Pike's article has not been matched by later work; earlier representations remain largely mysterious to most writing on the subject. Pike's account is an originary work.

The next notable contribution to the area is Gary Foley's article in *Identity* (1979). Unsurprisingly, Aboriginal contributions to writing on Aboriginality and film have been among the angriest in tone (see also Harding, 1992; Syron, 1993)[3]. Foley's piece is an aggressive one. Addressing the Aboriginal representations of the early 1970's films *Walkabout, Storm Boy, The Last Wave,* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith,* Foley presents an impassioned argument that the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the production context of such

films is an inexcusable one, and that the texts created suffer accordingly.

In the early 1980's, work by Stephen Muecke and Catriona Moore addresses the representation of Aboriginality and film. The articles these writers produce on the subject might be considered as introducing to the area a critical orthodoxy which has survived into the mid-1990's. Muecke's 'Available discourses on Aborigines' (1982) provides a series of frameworks for grouping representations of indigenous Australians (anthropological, racist and romantic), which have proven popular and durable[4]. Muecke's emphasis on 'discourse', and the argument in Moore and Muecke that filmic representations of race must be approached with a sensitivity to the functioning of film as a medium, have structured much of the work that has followed in this area, insisting on the need to discuss the conditions of formation of images, rather than their adequacy to the real[5].

The aspect of Moore and Muecke's work which is most cited, and with most approval, is their warning against a critical approach which searches for positive images: 'one must guard against totting up images as "positive" and "negative"' (1984: 37). They turn instead to readings of films which take account of contemporary government policy and an awareness of film theory (stars, mise-en-scene, point of view). This rejection of the concept of the positive image is presented as an axiom of modern Australian writing on Aboriginality (Jennings, 1993: 10; Langton, 1993: 41). However, at the same time it is interesting to note that, in an Australian context, such a move may yet prove to be premature. Moore and Muecke cite Robert Stam and Louise Spence (1983) in their rejection of a model of positive/negative images. But Stam and Spence are not working in a specifically Australian context; rather, they are writing against a history of Black American criticism. The groundbreaking work of Donald Bogle (1974), Jim Pines (1975) and Thomas Cripps (1977) in that country does indeed decry 'negative' images (understood to be synonymous with 'stereotypes'). However, there is little in the way of such history in an Australian context. In fact, it seems that the

terminology is largely introduced to the area by Moore and Muecke, even as they dismiss it. Indeed, this thesis will argue that not only does the dismissal of the 'positive image' neatly cover over an ideological bias in much film writing, it also fails to engage with recent Aboriginal writing which invokes just this vocabulary of 'positive'-ness as a desirable attribute.

Other aspects of work by both Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke must be applauded as consistently groundbreaking. As well as introducing key critical concepts to Australian writing on filmic Aboriginality, each addresses texts which have not previously been investigated. Catriona Moore's work on the 'case of Aboriginal welfare films' (1984), in particular, addresses texts which have not been written on by other academics. This is unusual. Much critical writing in this area (and particularly that which emerged in an excited rush in the late 1980's) has insistently returned to the same, very visible, filmic texts, in articles which show little interest in mapping out new genealogies of Aboriginal representation, and much more in relentlessly re-presenting known texts in a variety of judgmental ways. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *The Last Wave*, *Walkabout* and, of course, *Jedda*, are the focus of constantly shifting reinterpretations, each claiming to stand as adequate to represent the work of the film (Brown, 1987; Brown, 1988; Maynard, 1989; Mishra, 1989; Turner, 1988; Hickling-Hudson, 1990; Jennings, 1989; Jennings, 1993a; Jennings, 1993b).

These articles by (white) academics are linked by their status as film 'theory'; by a rejection of ideas of 'positive' or 'negative' images; and by their uninterest in presenting new material rather than rereading familiar texts. The limits of this particular academic genre can be seen by comparing such articles with Michael Leigh's 'Curiouser and curiouser' (1988). This latter piece, seeking to place recent films in a historical context, is involved in quite a different project, and in consequence produces quite a different sense of the landscape of Aboriginal representation in films.

Another generic feature of the main group of articles on
Aboriginality in film is the tendency to retain a tone of objectivity,
gained from the vocabulary of film theory, even while making
judgmental comments about films[6]. This stands in stark contrast to
the anger of Aboriginal writing on the subject. The tone of Gary
Foley's *Identity* article is matched by later work of John Harding
(1992), Brian Syron (1993) and Mudrooroo Nyoongah (1994). Harding
is adamant, for example, in his belief that it is 'inappropriate' for
'non-Kooris' to write 'Koori characters or issues into a story'
(Harding, 1992: 42); while Brian Syron's vocabulary is of 'terrible,
appalling films' such as *Chant, The Last Wave* and the recent
*Blackfellas*: 'I don't think at any point any of those films have
advanced the cause of Aboriginal people' (Syron, 1993: 166, 168).

As the issue of Aboriginality in cinema is more securely written into
filmic theory, it also moves from articles to monograph
consideration. Peter Malone's *In Black and White and Colour*
remains the most useful reference book in this area, providing brief
narrative summaries for dozens of films which have featured
Aboriginal presences (1987). Karen Jennings' *Sites of Difference*
(1993) gathers several years' worth of articles in the area into a survey
which discusses a dozen films in some depth. Marcia Langton's *Well
I Heard it on the Radio and I saw it on the Television* (1993) remains
the most suggestive work in this area; a fast-moving, jumpy policy-
statement which moves from considerations of industrial practice to
ideas of textual authenticity to wider social constructions of the
Aboriginal. Langton's is the least predictable account so far published
of the Aboriginal in Australian cinema, refusing to simply revisit the
familiar good and bad objects, also considering works such as *Jindalee
Lady* and SBS coverage of the Jardiwarnpa fire ceremony, texts which
have not otherwise been the focus of sustained attention.

5

This brief sketch of writing on Aboriginality and film suggests some
of the obsessions and commonly-visited areas of the work.  Working
through this history, a reckless generalisation might be made of the
work addressed in the above section.  Each of the articles mentioned
in this history involves itself in the act of producing *interpretations*
of films.  The readings produced are, necessarily in an academic
context, ever more sophisticated — ever more aware of critical
theory, and of the simplistic nature of previous readings.  There is
little sense in this writing that the interpretations presented in these
surveys are provisional, that they might be partial.  Writers seem
reluctant to acknowledge the status of the readings being made as, in
fact, only one possible interpretation of a film.  There is little effort to
investigate the ways in which these readings will be guaranteed,
what work is involved in producing them, what factors might work
to mitigate them.  A lack of acknowledgement that the
interpretations presented in these articles have in fact been produced
by a sophisticated and knowledgeable reader leads to precisely the
ontological claims noted at the start of this thesis: *'Jedda* is...'.

In this writing, the same texts are constantly revisited, and constantly
reinterpreted.  The fact that it is the same textual information which
is being constantly reordered has interesting implications:  for, as was
seen with Langton and Hodge and Mishra, the same texts are called
upon to support quite different readings.  In particular, the ways in
which one particular text — *Jedda* — is written into a history of
Aboriginal representation present a fascinating case study.

*Jedda* holds a canonical status in Australian film-making.  *'Jedda*
opens new cinema field', says a contemporary review (Brian
McArdle, 1955), and the film has been repeatedly accorded a
privileged place in that history, as the greatest work of one of the
country's best known auteurs: 'A film pioneer's greatest triumph:
*Jedda* could begin a new Australian era', says another review of the
film, and that is indeed how it as been understood in much critical

writing (E S Madden, 1955).  In the bleak film-making ground of 1950's Australia, *Jedda* stands as a shining, colourful beacon in and of the Australian landscape.  In the 1995 Australia Post release of 'A Centenary of Cinema' commemorative set, *Jedda*'s 45c stamp makes certain its place in a history of Australian cinema-making[7].

The film is also the centre of a series of contradictory readings by Australian academics — often being interpreted in directly opposite ways by different writers.  Exploring the ways in which this single film can be read by different writers makes clear the lack of accord on the use of a given text.

Some writers agree on the basic elements constituting the narrative of the film, for example, but disagree on the implications of that narrative. Part of Hodge and Mishra's celebration of *Jedda* is the fact that they see the film as open to readings as an 'Aboriginal' film. They read the narrative in terms of Aboriginal 'myths', suggesting that:

> [r]ape and incest, forbidden unions and acts of immorality and
> violence are staple ingredients of Aboriginal myths...the story of
> Marbuk and Jedda is typical of indigenous myth (Hodge and Mishra,
> 1991: 66, 67)

In this vein, they go on to suggest a reading whereby Marbuk's death comes about not because he challenges white authority, but because of his breaching of Aboriginal skin laws.

Marcia Langton agrees with elements of this interpretation: but for her, this leads not to celebration of the film, but to condemnation:  in doing just this, she argues, the film:

> rewrites Australian history so that the black rebel against white
> colonial rule is rebel against the laws of his own society...[i]t is
> Chauvel's inversion of truth on the black/white frontier as if none of
> the brutality, murder and land clearances occurred  (Langton, 1993: 45,
> 46)

So, the film shows the strength of black law: or the film undermines black law by co-opting it into the service of white colonial law. For Langton, the textual features appealed to by Hodge and Mishra can be organised into a roughly similar narrative; but the 'meaning', the implications, of that narrative are quite different. The anger of Langton's writing, and the insistence of Hodge and Mishra's celebration, make clear that neither of these readings is open for negotiation. *Jedda* shows that Aboriginal law is more powerful than white law. *Jedda* shows Aboriginal law co-opted into the service of white law.

Similarly, interpretations of *Jedda* insist either that the film relies on essentialist notions of Aboriginality; or that the film does not rely on essentialist notions of Aboriginality. For Graeme Turner, lamenting the 'naïveté and Romanticism' of the film:

> Any confusion Jedda feels as she is torn between white society and 'her own kind' is depicted unapologetically as a riot in the blood, a triumph of nature over culture...genetic rather than cultural (Turner, 1988: 140)

Yet for Anne Hickling-Hudson, *Jedda* is a film to be celebrated, as '[i]t is with sympathy and sharp observation that Chauvel shows the white upbringing of Jedda on a ranch'. In her interpretation, the emotional distress experienced by the Aboriginal girl is not shown to be genetic: for this writer, the character is: 'tormented by cultural conflict' (Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 266, 267): rather than by the mixed blood boiling in her veins.

Again, for Turner:

> In one scene, Jedda is playing some western classical music on the homestead piano. Outside, the tribal, sexually threatening black male — Marbuk — is singing a song which completes deep emotional connections in the young girl. The camera portrays her confusion by cross-cutting between her increasingly exercised face and a painted bark shield hanging on the wall immediately in her view. As her agitation increases, the shield visibly vibrates, the manipulation of focus mimicking the dilation of her vision as she fights to retain her

> hold on white rationality.  This is comic for audiences now; the scene's
> assumptions are so dated, and the filmic techniques used to represent
> them so melodramatic.  But it is representative of the definition of
> racial difference in our films — then as now — as genetic rather than
> cultural... (Turner, 1988: 140)

This is quoted at some length in order to demonstrate the attention
to textual detail involved in producing Turner's interpretation.  For
this writer, this is what the film *does* — the only possible
interpretation.  But Anne Hickling-Hudson, using exactly the same
textual information, produces quite another reading:

> Sarah's [Jedda's white adoptive mother] determination to keep Jedda in
> the white world is symbolised by her leading the sixteen year-old girl to
> her piano practice... The image of Jedda at the polished grand piano
> visually emphasises the discipline and restraint that she has absorbed,
> but her personal anguish is at the same time shown when, sobbing, she
> discordantly crashes the piano keys to drown out the distant sound of
> tribal chanting and didgeridoo...(Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 267)

In Hickling-Hudson's analysis of the same textual moment, then,
these elements of the film become a symbol of Jedda's 'cultural
conflict' — not her bloody racial cocktail[8].  She notes, as does Turner,
that the scene is played in a grandly excessive manner; but finds no
need to read it as therefore implying genetic readings of race: '[i]t is
played in the melodramatic style of the time, but is symbolic of her
cultural conflict' (Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 267).

Another axis of contention in readings of *Jedda* is the issue of
objectification.  Building on the work of Robert Stam and Louise
Spence, Moore and Muecke demand an attention to filmic
construction of Aboriginality which is sensitive to the specificity of a
visual medium (Moore and Muecke, 1984: 40).  They suggest, for
example, that the construction of point of view in camera shots and
editing works to establish identification in the cinema.  From this
perspective, they are unhappy with *Jedda*.  The film shows:

> ...blacks as solitary silent figures who move through magnificent
> landscapes....[a] colonialist perspective [which does not show] the
> point of view of the people being displaced...(Moore and Muecke,
> 1984: 40).

Anne Hickling-Hudson works with a similar vocabulary as she
divides Australian films featuring Aboriginality into the categories of
'blacks as object' and 'blacks as subject'; and yet, for her, *Jedda* is one
of those films which should be celebrated for allowing the heroine to
be a subject, one of the films which 'have as their subject blacks and
their reaction to a white world' (Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 267).  For
Moore and Muecke, *Jedda* is involved in a project of objectifying
Aboriginality: for Hickling-Hudson, the film allows Aboriginal
characters to take the place of subjects.

Another set of contradictory readings emerges as writers organise
*Jedda* into groups with other films of Australian Aboriginality.  For
Hodge and Mishra, for example, *Jedda* is to be understood as quite
distinct from films like *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith:*  formally,
they contend, the latter film: 'remains firmly within the conventions
of realism, without the levels of meanings that Chauvel['s *Jedda*] can
also hint at' (Hodge and Mishra, 1991: 68).   But for Kevin Brown,
working with 'deep structures', these two films should in fact be
grouped together, along with *Journey out of Darkness* and *Come out
Fighting*, under a single rubric:  'the theme of Aboriginal defeat...the
"message" of this theme tends to suggest that Aboriginal people
cannot live in European society/culture' (Brown, 1988: 483)[9].

These readings are presented and contrasted in order to make
obvious what should already be self-evident:  that interpretations of
films — even interpretations made by concerned, intelligent and
knowledgeable academics — must always be understood as partial,
always provisional.  Each of the readings presented above makes
sense if a certain interpretive approach is taken to *Jedda*.  But while it
must be commonplace that these readings cannot exhaust the
meanings of a film, and cannot begin to address the uses made of a
text in arenas other than academic interpretive writing, such an

axiom is not necessarily apparent in these articles.  As was noted at
the start of the thesis, each claims a status of ontology:  the film is
racist, or not:  the representation is essentialist, or it is not;
Aborigines are presented as objects, or as subjects; *Jedda* is
'sickening...in its racism', or it is 'the most successful representation
of Aborigines by Whites in Australian cinema'.


6


This thesis, then, is involved in producing avowedly partial readings
of film and television texts involving Aboriginality; in
acknowledging the status of those readings, and the ways in which
they might be stabilised.  The theoretical basis of the work can be read
from reader response and reception theories, from semiotics, from
post-colonialism, or from a formalism informed by cognitive
psychology[10].

The various approaches invoked can be read to support a common
axiom:  that while the uses of texts by readers are not unlimited, and
although they must function within certain constraints, the work of
interpreting films and television programs is a creative act.  Texts do
not determine readings; neither are readers infinitely powerful.
There is necessarily a tension involved in the encounter of reader
and text, one which must be accounted for, rather than dismissed.
What is being addressed in different histories is the status of the film
or television text as a 'structured polysemy' (Dyer, 1986: 68).

Thus, 'reader-oriented criticism', a term which usefully brings
together histories of reception theory and reader response criticism
(Allen, 1987: 74) offers some suggestive terminology.  Hans Jauss, for
example, refers to the reader's 'horizons of expectation' which are
mobilised in the work of interpreting a text (Jauss, 1982: 44)[11].
Stanley Fish's work similarly gestures to the extra-textual structures
which surround the act of interpretation with his arguments about
'interpretive communities' (Fish, 1980: 14).

In the same vein, Umberto Eco's recent writing on semiotics is concerned to note the tension which exists in the encounter of text and reader.  Against imaginary Bad Objects of reception theory and French philosophy, Eco makes clear his belief that a text is not:

> a machine that produces an infinite deferral...that, once...separated
> from its utterer...floats (so to speak) in the vacuum of a potentially
> infinite range of possible interpretations...(Eco, 1990: 2)

Rather, Eco wishes to acknowledge the boundaries placed on meaning:  he marks these with the phrase 'limits of interpretation' (Eco, 1990: 6), arguing that semiotic elements of a text are indeed open to a variety of interpretations, but culturally specific structures will work to make them legible in particular ways.

From a postcolonial perspective, it is once again commonsensical that 'meaning and truth...change according to who is speaking and who is listening' (Alcoff, 1991-2: 72); a statement which does not require that texts be understood as completely open, but does acknowledge the status of readers in producing interpretations. Gayatri Spivak's account of postcolonialism favours a 'post-structuralism' in which texts are open to an infinite number of meanings — which are rapidly closed down by particular circumstances (Spivak, 1990: 51).

These 'limits', these 'horizons', the ways in which texts-in-culture make meaning possible by closing it down, are also discussed in specifically filmic work.  For Tony Bennett, for example, the 'incrustations' upon a text are (from Pierre Machery) other cultural products which comment upon that text (Bennett, 1982: 3); again, these 'incrustations' make interpretation possible.  David Bordwell, similarly wary of 'the prospect of completely "open" readings' (Bordwell, 1989: 265), works from cognitive psychology to produce a schematic illustration of meaning-making processes.  He proposes that in approaching films, readers[12] make use of 'interpretive schemata' — cognitive structures built up from learned expectations of how to make meaning.  These schemata might include the

'horizons of expectation' arising from knowledge of previous texts, the rules formulated by 'interpretive communities', and the suitable intertexts validated as 'incrustations'.

## 7

To return to the history of writing on Aboriginality in Australian films, most of the articles previously discussed can be seen to make interpretations of particular films by invoking (more or less explicitly) a variety of interpretive frameworks — conceptual schemata — through which sense is made of representations of Aboriginality.  Sean Maynard, for example, makes sense of films by seeing how easily he can fit textual elements into a series of rules which might be understood as 'art': believable characters, a well structured script, naturalistic acting.  In his article, *Where the Green Ants Dream* is criticised as 'dramatically crass'; of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, he says that 'the narrative does not work particularly well';  while the most useful thing he finds to say about *Women of the Sun* is to point out that 'the episodes are not entirely convincing because of a certain self-consciousness of performance and direction' (Maynard, 1989: 222, 223, 238).  Maynard's work illustrates the way in which interpretive schemata provide ways in which to judge textual elements; and is also a particularly telling example of the dangerous limitations involved in the thoughtless application of such an approach.

Wider cultural knowledges, not specifically relating to film, provide another example of interpretive schemata which have been mobilised to make sense of films involving Aboriginality.  For example, at the start of their essay on Aboriginal film, Moore and Muecke sketch a series of: 'discursive formations which characterise the making of films in Australia containing images of Aborigines...*assimilationist...multiculturalist...*leftist *independent...*' (Moore and Muecke, 1984: 36); making sense of films in terms of these wider cultural histories then forms at least part of Moore and

Muecke's work in discussing these films.  The government policies
to which Moore and Muecke's terms gesture are also taken up by
other writers in making interpretations:  *'Jedda* is specifically about
integration...' (Turner, 1988: 138).

Other articles can be seen to make their interpretations through
templates derived from film theory.  Anne Hickling-Hudson's
interpretations of these films, for example, takes up a discourse of
'objects' and 'subjects' (developed most fully in feminist film theory)
and reads the texts through these.  Similarly, the interpretations
made by Kevin Brown are the result of ordering textual elements
within an interpretive schema of narrative organisation, taken from
a structuralist history of film theory (Brown, 1988: 474).

Interpretive schemata particular to Aboriginal filmic representation,
are also commonly invoked.  As suggested above, Muecke's
taxonomy of 'available discourses' is taken up by writers who
interpret films by ordering them into the categories 'racist',
'romantic' and 'anthropological' (Brown, 1988; Dougal and Lucas,
1988).  The most popular series of interpretive structures, though, set
in place arguments about the representation of Aboriginality as
either a genetic or a cultural phenomenon, and then read particular
texts as promoting either one or the other understanding of race — as
with Graeme Turner and Anne Hickling-Hudson's interpretations of
*Jedda*, cited above.  Karen Jennings explicitly invokes such a
taxonomy, suggesting social categories of Aboriginality as
'essentialist' (Jennings, 1993b: 12), as 'resistance', and as 'persistence'
(Jennings, 1993b: 14): a set of categories which can then be used in
order to make sense of Aboriginality in filmic texts.  To make a
reading of a film which interprets it as not/essentialist becomes a
typical part of academic writing on these films.

Other taxonomies provide a more detailed set of categories of racism
into which representations of Aboriginality might be slotted.
Graeme Turner, for example, provides 'standard strategies for
differentiating between white and black in Australian cinema'.
These are:

...black blood...collapsing distinctions between Aboriginality and

nature....Finally, the most obvious sign of difference is blackness itself...

(Turner, 1988: 140)

Once again, this set of categories provides a way of organising textual information, of producing readings of these films which can state, finally and without negotiation, *'Jedda* is...' (essentialist, racist, collapsing distinctions between Aboriginality and nature...).

8

The present thesis does not wish to downplay the value of previous work in making visible histories of Aboriginal representation, and in raising questions about the place of such texts in the wider circulation of Aboriginality as a social 'thing' (Langton, 1993: 31). However, the adversarial stance of much of this writing — insisting on unitary and final readings — seems to be counterproductive. It locks academic discussion into a series of fruitless exchanges of assertion and denial — 'Yes it is'; 'No it isn't' — which finally can go no further. It might prove more useful rather to signal the way in which different 'limits' or 'horizons' might work in the circulation and consumption of texts to produce a variety of readings of Aboriginality.

The fact that audiences have a place in the construction of meanings about race has, as noted above, been largely effaced in writing about Aboriginality and film. It is true that Robert Stam and Louise Spence, addressing a variety of specific filmic factors involved in the production of racial representations suggest that: '[d]istribution and exhibition policies also inflect the audience reception of a given film...' (Stam and Spence, 1983: 11); but this gesture towards the possibility of a variety of readings has not been taken up in later critical writing with the same enthusiasm as, for example, their comments on the textual production of 'objectified' positions for black characters. Again, when Moore and Muecke acknowledge the freedom of audiences in making meaning from film texts, they see this as an occasion for worry, a problem which film-makers must

overcome by producing texts which close down rogue meanings as efficiently as possible:

> ...in 1975, as much as now, there were dominant *racist* discourses on Aborigines circulating...Nothing about the context of [a screening of *Sons of Namatjira*] secures either a racist or a non-racist reading....Film cannot *show* instances of racism to what it *may* assume is a non-racist audience, and expect by its agency to magically eliminate it.  It needs to identify the problem...(Moore and Muecke, 1984: 51)

It is possible , however, to find writing in this area whose approach is more congruent with the concerns of this thesis: which presents readings which are avowedly partial, and which makes no claims to exhaust the meaning of a text.  For example, the work of Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo) on *Jedda* presents an interpretation which situates itself and makes visible its own conditions of possibility — and yet insists on the validity of this partial reading.  Johnson's interpretation of various elements of the film lines up with other writers quoted above — for example, he agrees with Hodge and Mishra that the narrative suggests that 'both male and female have broken the [Aboriginal] law, both deserve to die, and do' (Johnson, 1987: 55).  However, Johnson is not claiming these interpretations as inescapable or final.  He assigns his statements to particular reading positions — in a manner which perhaps homogenises these positions (he assigns the position the name 'Aboriginal women'), but does at least reveal an awareness that the readings made of *Jedda* depend on the engagement of spectators with the text (Johnson, 1987: 53, 55).  At the same time, this provisional status of his readings does not render them any less real, or any less important.  Johnson's piece argues strongly that *Jedda* is an important film.  For him, the representation of Aboriginal masculinity in the text is exciting and hopeful, offering otherwise unglimpsed possibilities for Aboriginal male potency.  It is not necessary to agree with his assessment of the relationship between gender roles and biological sexes to recognise the excitement he finds in reading *Jedda*, and to acknowledge the possibility that his readings might prove useful in wider social debates about Aboriginality.

9

These are the frameworks through which academic writing has previously interpreted Aboriginality in these texts — from the perspectives of 'art', of film theory, from wider social discourses of Aboriginality. This thesis now begins to explore some of the other overlapping sets of schemata which might work in closing down the Aboriginality of films and of television programs, structuring a variety of readings for audiences. In this, the interpretations circulated in academic readings must be acknowledged as important. There is no desire to dismiss previous academic writing as 'just' 'academic' (in the sense of being abstract and thus irrelevant), in favour of the interpretations made in 'the real world' of non-academic consumers. Academics are just as real as anyone else; and academic discourses of film theory also enter wider social arenas (the terminology of psychoanalysis, of stereotypes, subjecthood and objectification, are all exchanged in non-academic situations). The limit of this present work is a desire to work with a 'historical poetics' of Aboriginal filmic and televisual representation (Bordwell, 1989: 265): to produce interpretations of these texts which have some sense of their specificity, discussing the ways in which, 'in determinate circumstances, films...serve specific functions and achieve specific effects' (Bordwell, 1989: 267). This thesis looks at some of the historically specific, but previously ignored, ways in which limits are set on the interpretations of texts.

The first section of the thesis investigates cultural models of spectatorship. Films and television programs are material objects, and they are written into culture in particular ways: there are culturally validated forms of consumption for each medium. These models of sanctioned use interact with wider discourses of Aboriginality: they provide horizons of expectation — limits of interpretation — simply by suggesting ways in which texts should be consumed.

The second section looks at the way in which texts are commonly circulated as parts of wider oeuvres. The sets of validated intertexts which are presented as genres, and as an author's oeuvre, similarly provide interpretive schemata which help to render films and television programs intelligible. These schemata also offer suggestive material for understanding the ways in which readings might be made of Aboriginality in these texts.

The last section of the thesis looks at those interpretations of films and of television programs which are circulated in academic and journalistic texts — Macherey's 'incrustations', writing *about* texts. Offering particular ways not only of making sense of texts, but also of evaluating them, these commentaries once again provide enabling limits of interpretation on texts; and particularly upon the interpretations available of Aboriginality in these texts.

## 10

This shift of critical approach — moving away from the idea that texts inevitably produce single interpretations by readers — is facilitated by (and in turn facilitates) a shift of critical object. As noted above, the genealogy of Aboriginal representation which is acknowledged by much work in this area allows only for feature films: and even then, only those which can easily be read into a certain art-house/'Australian' generic provenance. This thesis attempts to present something of an alternative genealogy, contributing to a history of Aboriginal representation which has remained previously invisible. While *Jedda, Walkabout, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith,* and *The Fringe Dwellers* have been written, rewritten and overwritten, other texts — particularly televisual texts — have vanished, ephemeral not only in broadcast medium, but in critical approaches which preserve with their focus only that material which is easily retained and archived. Despite a critical shift in other areas of film and television theory to forms which are no longer despised (soap operas, horror films), Aboriginality in these forms is

ignored, under an academic laziness which bemoans the 'absence' of Aboriginal characters and issues from these texts. Shifting critical paradigms, then, allows for these forms to be given the more serious attention that is necessary in order to outline a genealogy which is one, not simply of lacunae, but of Aboriginal *presences*, representations structured in particular ways.

These, then, are the intentions of this thesis: to gesture towards an alternative genealogy of texts which have gone otherwise unremarked; to suggest the limits of interpretation which might interact in the production of meaning from these texts; through always insisting that these readings are necessarily partial, to suggest that debates on Aboriginal representation might be conducted in terms other than deaf adversarialism: and finally, to suggest that

it might be more useful to say of the most famous 1950's representation of Aboriginality in Australia, rather than *'Jedda* is...', or *'Jedda* isn't...', that in fact *'Jedda* might be...' In addressing the provisional and localised spaces in which interpretations are made, the thesis pays attention directly to the practices and processes through which Australian cinema and televion are making race mean.

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1 Tom O'Regan (1990b) and Toby Miller (1995) both suggest that Aboriginal broadcasting has consistently proven fascinating to white Australian academics worried by pessimistic accounts of (white) monumental mass culture, offering an exciting and suitably distant account of 'authentic' participation in cultuer.

2 See the partial bibliography of Michael's writing presented in O'Regan (ed) (1990) for some idea of the scope, and the sheer amount of his work in the area.

3 Work by Wal Saunders (1988) and Marcia Langton (1993) has not adopted this tone.

4   For example, these categories are taken up explicitly by Jo Dougal and
    Rod Lucas (1988), and are cited and reworked by Bob Hodge and
    Vijay Mishra (1990: 223).

5   Kevin Brown follows the concerns of Moore and Muecke when he
    worries that filmic narratives promote an 'individualistic concept
    of action' (Brown, 1988: 489).  Karen Jennings employs their
    understanding of multiculturalism and the way films are written
    into such discourses (Jennings, 1983).  Anne Hickling-Hudson takes
    up their call to pay attention to the filmic construction of point of
    view (Hickling-Hudson, 1990).  Graeme Turner partakes of an
    extensive engagement with the ideas of their article, asserting a
    'small academic industry' in the area, of which they are his primary
    representatives (Turner, 1988: 135).

6   As Graeme Turner notes of Moore and Muecke: 'Their discussion of
    contemporary independent films is severely doctrinaire, with the
    film-makers' good intentions all too predictably juxtaposed against
    their unforeseen but reactionary consequences' (Turner, 1988: 139).

7   Along with *The Story of the Kelly Gang, On Our Selection, Picnic at
    Hanging Rock* and *Strictly Ballroom*:  an interesting series of
    moments in the development of Australian film.

8   See also the reading of Vijay Mishra, who believes that
    'Chauvel...avoids the inevitability of genetic forces...' in the film
    (Mishra, 1989:  179).

9   Anne Hickling-Hudson similarly wants to group the two films together,
    reasoning that in both Aboriginal people are treated as subjects
    rather than objects (Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 206).

10  Such an eclectic critical heritage need not be seen as problematic; as
    Paula Amad has recently argued, such 'theory shopping' may be the
    most appropriate way to approach the texts of a popular culture
    whose perceived attributes include just such a carefree
    appropriation (Amad, 1994).

11  There are elements of reader-oriented theory which are less useful for
    this work.  Jauss goes on to use this idea to justify value-judgements
    of texts on the basis of the extent to which they disrupt these
    expectations.  This is not the objective of the present thesis.  It is also

true, as Gayatri Spivak points out, that certain histories of reader response criticism have in fact naturalised a reader who is white and male (Spivak and Adamson, 1990: 50), thus quite failing to open out the multiple possibilities of engagement with a text.

12  Bordwell's analysis in this book is particularly concerned with interpretations made by academic film writers, but his approach may be generalised to other readers.

# Part A: Introduction
## Spectatorship as limiting practice

The purpose of this thesis, as stated in the introduction, is to begin to produce an account of those limits which cultural expectations, interpretive practices and contextual discourses place on readings made of Aboriginality in film and television. The first group of 'horizons' is found in the social practices of media consumption.

'Spectatorship' is a term which refers most simply to the ways in which people watch films and television programs. Audiences consume the texts of these media in different ways: and elements of the spectatorial process for each medium will have implications for the interpretations made of Aboriginality in relevant texts.

These two chapters examine differences in the practices of spectatorship for the two media. Working from the assumption that people bring to the experience of watching films expectations and learned practices quite different from those brought to television programs, this section obviously and necessarily involves itself in a process of contingent generalisation. So, for example, the comments that follow are based on Western commercial cinematic exhibition practices of the early twentieth century until the 1990's, for example. Similarly, they presume static models of 'good' media, models which will, in social practice, rarely be employed in any ideal form. There is no concern with specialised media use — such as that exhibited in the consumption of cult cinema, for example (Lewis, 1992).

More significantly, the address of this section is to the white spectator. As Toby Miller suggests, the media use of Aboriginal audiences has in fact proven to be a fascinating object for white academics, providing a valuable example of resistant reading practices (Miller, 1995: 13). In making these

viewing practices visible as being different, exciting and interesting, white spectatorship has remained a largely absent terrain.  As suggested in the introduction, the white use of these texts continues to be taken for granted (as being 'racist', or not 'racist').  In contrast to previous writing, it is these white spectatorship practices which are of interest to the present work.

How would one begin to sketch an outline of spectating practice for films and for television programs?  While little has been written that explicitly addresses the practices of spectatorship, all writing on film and television necessarily involves implicit positions on this subject.  A psychoanalytically-informed 'Screen-theory' (Williamson, 1988: 108), for example, in which films are understood to produce subjectivity, requires a model of a transfixed spectator (identifying with and unable/refusing to escape from the text before her/him).  Such axiomatic accounts of spectatorship have been called into practice, largely by work addressing the television audience.  John Caughie suggests that it is in desperation at television's lack of textual difference that researchers have turned to the audience for distinction (Caughie, 1984); this turn produces work such as that of Jane Root, who provides descriptions of a range of spectating practices involved in the consumption of broadcast television (Root, 1986).  These accounts make visible the fact that spectatorship is a social practice, a material part of the work of interpreting film and television, and one which cannot be ignored.

It is important to understand that the practices of spectatorship described in this section are not the result of a determining technology.  There is no ontological *nature* of cinema which *demands* that it be consumed in a certain way.  This cannot even be argued at one remove — that is, it would be false to suggest that the technology used in the production of cinematic texts can result only in certain kinds of texts, and that it is these which demand particular modes of spectatorship.  Rather, understanding the origins of spectatorial processes, and their relationships with texts requires the invocation of a complex series of mediations.  The elements of technology, industry, text and audience are involved in a series of relationships.  Cinematic technology, for example, allows for much more information to be conveyed in an image than is the case with broadcast television; while the mechanism of distribution promotes an attentive

look in the consumption of that image.  Such a regime of spectatorship
may then feed back into the production of the texts themselves, as the
industry finds, via the linking process of market research, that audiences
take such pleasures from these texts.  So, to take one example, when this
work goes on to discuss the fact that cinema privileges image over sound,
what is being discussed is not only texts, or technology, or the ways in
which the industry favours such products, or even simply the ways in
which audiences read films; but all of these, and more — the interactions
between each of them.  As John Ellis puts it: 'the photo effect of the
cinematic image is one characteristic that is intensified by the form in
which cinema images are consumed in our society' (Ellis, 1982: 39); while
the industry's promotion of this possibility has: 'produced aesthetic effects
and consequent technological developments' (Ellis, 1982: 50).

Similarly, for television, the technology 'has profound effects on the kind
of representations and spectator attitudes that broadcast television creates
for itself' (Ellis, 1982: 127).  None of the terms should be thought of as
originary; rather, each is caught up with, and has effects upon each of the
others.

This is the model which must be borne in mind as this section progresses.
Spectatorship is a term which draws attention to models of media use in a
culture.  The ways in which texts are consumed is not determined by the
technology of a medium: nor is it entirely distinct from it.  Rather, the
distribution processes of a given medium act as a point of negotiation
between the audience and the text.

Beyond the technology even of the distribution, though, there are learned
skills which are brought to bear in spectating, at a film or in front of a
television set, which provide for viewers models of what will generally be
sanctioned or not sanctioned in the use of that medium's texts.  The
interaction of these various factors provides the model of 'spectatorship'
which informs the first section of this thesis.

# Chapter A.1: Visibility

### A.1.1

When making sense of cinematically-distributed films, audiences make use primarily of information which is offered visually; in approaching broadcast television texts, audiences rather employ aurally-presented data. These learned practices involve implications for the interpretations made of Aboriginality in the two media: both in relation to the texts it is possible to make and distribute within those media; and the uses which can be made of those texts.

This somewhat irreverent generalisation provides the starting point for the first chapter. It is not the place of this thesis to go over the work which allows such a generalisation to be made; nor to address the necessary exclusions and assumptions it involves. Nevertheless, it is perhaps only fair to suggest a brief overview.

> It is only scientists studying effects, and professional reviewers, who watch television in a darkened room, insulated from the rest of the world. For the rest of us, television watching goes on alongside the rest of our lives....A minority of viewers are passively slumped in front of the television set. Many are absolutely locked into what is happening on the screen...another, almost equally large number, appear to be oblivious to the fact that the television is on at all... (Root, 1986: 21, 25)

It seems to be generally accepted that the viewing of broadcast television in the domestic sphere allows for the possibility of a distracted mode of viewing. The domestic is a social sphere, one in which other people may be involved in conversations and discussion while the television is on (Morley, 1986). In a personal rather than a public sphere, viewers can simultaneously engage in other practices; while the technology of the domestic television means that the tv set often has: 'no surrounding

darkness...no rapt attention...It has a lower degree of sustained concentration' (Ellis, 1982: 128).

The mode of distracted spectatorship is only one possibility. It accounts only for some of the viewers described by Root in her work above; it does not take account of broadcast television consumed in public areas (in pubs), in cult situations (Doctor Who fan club meetings), in the past (Lynn Spigel suggests that television sets were initially understood to be the central focal point of a living area — Spigel, 1992: 107-108). Despite such a multitude of caveats, it is possible to state, with John Ellis, that the characteristic mode of television viewing in the latter half of the twentieth century, and at least in first world countries, is a less intensely attentive one than is that of cinema spectating:

> ...commercial cinema...provides an image that is large, usually substantially larger than the individuals watching it. It also provides a particular set of circumstances for watching this image: the audience is seated in rows, separated from each other to some degree, and the image is projected in near darkness...the gaze, the intense activity of looking, that the circumstances of the cinema (sitting still in the dark) are designed to encouraged...is the constitutive activity of cinema. Broadcast television demands rather a different kind of looking: that of the glance... (Ellis, 1982: 40, 50).

### A.1.2

This mode of distracted spectatorship intersects with another aspect of television use, and of television texts. Television is a less insistently visual medium than is cinema; it is possible for television spectatorship to rely less on visual information in order to make meaning; and television texts often supply more information aurally than is the case in equivalent cinematic productions.

'It must not be forgotten' comments Tarroni, 'that in television, the picture is not as impressive as it is in the cinema' (Tarroni, 1979: 442), a sentiment echoed by Zettl (1981: 120). In a situation where the technology is less able to communicate information visually, and the typical viewing

situation does not demand attention to the screen, it is unsurprising that television texts are often constructed so as to be meaningful even if only aural information is present:

> [S]ound radiates in all directions, whereas the view of the television image is sometimes restricted, [as] direct eye contact is needed with the screen.  Sound can be heard where the screen cannot be seen (Ellis, 1982:  128)

For these reasons, it is possible to characterise television texts, and the way in which they are consumed, in this way:

> The image is the central reference for cinema.  But for television, sound has a more centrally defining role.  Many of television's characteristic broadcast forms rely upon sound as the major carrier of information...Sound tends to anchor meaning on television, where the image tends to anchor it with cinema (Ellis, 1982:  129)

As Jane Root notes with a disarming appeal to common sense,

> Everyday experience tells us that it is quite possible to keep an eye on a meal and watch the news, or even to stand in the kitchen and follow a drama in the living room from what is said on the soundtrack  (Root, 1986: 27).

Such assertions have not been proven in any empirical sense, but a weight of anecdotal evidence surrounds the relationships between sound and image in films and the typical broadcast forms of television[1].  While constantly asserting the contingent nature of these generalisations, they will prove useful in this work.

### A.1.3

> The image is the central reference for cinema.  But for television, sound has a more centrally defining role.  Many of television's characteristic broadcast forms rely upon sound as the major carrier of information...Sound tends to anchor meaning on television, where the image tends to anchor it with cinema (Ellis, 1982: 129)

Cinematic texts tend to be organised to communicate visually more of the information necessary in making an interpretation of the film.  Television texts typical of 'broadcast forms' rather provide a mostly aural framework. How is such an understanding of spectatorship relevant to questions of Aboriginality and its interpretation in Australian films and television programs?

With an awareness that cinema works primarily in terms of visible tropes, a rapid sketch of Australian cinema's Aboriginality is revealing.  The highest-profile examples of filmic Aboriginality are all immediately, *physically* obvious as Aboriginal.  Robert Tudawali (*Jedda*), David Gulpilil (*Walkabout, Storm Boy, The Last Wave*) and David Ngoombujarra (*Blackfellas*) all fit remarkably well into a settler-Australian conception of what an Aborigine 'should' look like.  As well as 'typical' features (nose shape, dark hair), each has that physical attribute which, for settler audiences, immediately denotes Aboriginality — each has dark skin.

It is historically true, in fact, that an important part of the Aboriginality which has been constructed by the cinema, is the work of dark skin as an immediately visible, a primary marker of the Aboriginal.  To a settler audience watching these films, even without hearing any assertion of Aboriginality, the information is immediately conveyed by such visual means.  This is 'good cinema': it fits well with the model of the attentive spectator, gazing at the filmic image.  By contrast, those films which feature less visibly 'Aboriginal' actors — Lydia Miller, in *Jindalee Lady*, John Moore in *Zombie Brigade* — tend to be lower budget, less prestigious productions.  (Neither of the above films has yet secured a theatrical release).  Similarly, it is interesting that when James Ricketson's film *Blackfellas*  was heralded as a breakthrough in authentic representations of Aboriginality (as will be discussed in Chapter C.1), although technically the star of the film is John Moore, the actor who in fact emerged from the resulting critical orgy as most visibly (and authentically) Aboriginal was David Ngoombujarra; an actor whose character in the film is secondary, but whose Aboriginality is communicated in much more visible ways.

Another interesting case, and one which provides material for distinguishing between film's and television's Aboriginalities, is *The*

*Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Schepisi, 1978).   Although Tommy Lewis is
not as dark-skinned as the above-mentioned actors, his appearance is
undeniably 'Aboriginal' (in the sense noted above).  More revealingly,
popular anecdotes about his casting insist on the fact that it was precisely
for his ability to signify Aboriginality *visually* that Lewis was cast in the
role.  Paul Williams describes the way in which director Fred Schepisi
'found' Tommy Lewis for the part of Jimmie Blacksmith: at the
culmination of a well-publicised 'Search for a Star', Schepisi spotted Lewis
at Melbourne airport.  Purely on a visual basis — that Lewis looked like
what Schepisi imaged the Aboriginal lead of *Chant* should look like — he
was offered an audition.  For the director, the most important signifying
aspect of Lewis was that his appearance was markedly Aboriginal
(Williams, 1979: 8):  'Schepisi's search for Jimmie Blacksmith [involved]
the right look — that is, one enmeshed in expectations of its projected
['settler'] audience...' (Turner, 1988:  143).

In this unsurprising history of Aboriginality in Australian cinema, a
spectating practice which favours the transmission of information in a
visual form has resulted in texts where the Aboriginal is unflinchingly
visible.  Aboriginality equals dark skin; and (although examples such as
John Duigan's *Flirting* [1989] prevent the reversal from being too neat),
dark skin equals Aboriginality.  Such a history has implications for wider
Australian understandings of what Aboriginality is.

### A.1.4

'[C]olour — rather than race — was and still is the major criterion of
Aboriginality' (Colin Tatz, 1992: 77).

In wider Australian culture, the presentation of Aboriginality has relied
primarily on visual tropes.  This has been the case legally (Tatz, 1992), in
everyday discourses of authenticity (Langton, 1981), in filmic notations,
and in the welfare policies which sought to breed ever lighter coloured
children (Read, 1982).  Colin Tatz provides a brief history of state
legislations as they relate to Aboriginal people, and makes clear the degree
to which Aboriginality was understood to be a visible quantity.  The legal

definition of an Aborigine in Queensland, for example, until 1982, relied on 'the eye of the beholder' (Tatz, 1992:  77).  In the Northern Territory, the Aboriginal identity of people arrested depended solely on 'the observation of the arresting officer' (Tatz, 1992: 77); while the same state's Welfare Ordinance allowed for individuals to be made wards of state 'solely on the *appearance* of descent' (Tatz, 1992: 76, emphasis added).

An example of an everyday articulation of colour in relation to Aboriginality comes in a statement from an interviewee in the documentary *Black Man's Houses* : 'They've got blue eyes and blonde hair...how can they be Aborigines?' (Steve Thomas, 1992).  As the director notes on the sleeve of the video, 'Real Aborigines are black'.  Gillian Cowlishaw investigates other discursive arenas, and finds that even for anthropologists, skin colour remains a 'major signifier' of Aboriginality (Cowlishaw, 1986:  228).  Athol Chase observes that urban Aborigines are regarded as less 'authentic': at least partly because culture is understood through its visible elements:  'Aboriginality is reduced to the immediately observable' (Chase, 1981: 24).  As Colin Tatz summarises the situation, the Aboriginal image: 'in white eyes...is that of the Different Ones, the Differently Coloured Ones...' (Tatz, 1992:  74).

What are the implications of such an understanding of Aboriginality?  In what ways does an Aboriginality understood primarily in terms of skin colour impact on the ways in which Aboriginal identity is circulated in Australian society?

Firstly, as Robert Miles makes clear in his history of racism, a focus on skin colour has proved consistently useful to be able to identify a group in a visible way.  If 'us' and 'them' are visually distinct, it is much simpler to tell who is included in any given community — and who, in turn, is excluded.  This visibility is necessary for protection, reassurance and in order to naturalise discourses of inequality  (Miles, 1989).  Skin colour is the perfect marker in these terms — physical and inescapable, it is a permanent mark of difference.  But that act of rendering the Aboriginal visible which has been promoted by filmic spectating practices also has immediate implications for current debates about the nature of contemporary Aboriginal identity.

## A.1.5

To assert that only dark-skinned Aborigines are authentically Aboriginal (Chase, 1981; Langton, 1981) is necessarily to invoke a 'discourse of Aboriginal identity' that Hollinsworth describes as a 'biological descent ("blood")' (Hollinsworth, 1992a: 137). Recent debates around contemporary Aboriginal identity have distinguished between those identities which rely on the cultural transmission of information; and those which rather invoke 'biological determinism' (Hollinsworth, 1992a: 142) to explain affiliation to an identity. This latter, the idea that it is a person's genetic heritage which determines her identity, is the stance which has been excoriated in academia as 'essentialism' (Lattas, 1992b: 160).

The relationship between skin colour and 'essentialist' arguments is an uneven one. From one direction, assertions that (authentic, real) Aborigines are dark-skinned necessarily involves an understanding of genetic identity. Skin colour is indeed genetically determined. This makes possible racist dismissal of those Aborigines who are not dark-skinned as unreal, inauthentic, as 'carpet baggers' (Peter Ryan, quoted in Hollinsworth 1992a: 142). Conversely, though, it is possible to argue for a genetic Aboriginal identity which does not involve skin colour at all. This is neatly illustrated in an event recounted by Keeffe:

> Mark, a tutor at the Aboriginal cultural-awareness camps, was listening to the complaint of a young boy, who said, 'You know what gets me? What gets me is when kids in the playground reckon I'm not Aboriginal because I've got blonde hair and blue eyes'. Mark looked at the boy and replied, 'You know what you should tell them? You tell them that you're Aboriginal because you've got Aboriginality in your blood...even if you've only got one drop of Aboriginal blood, you're Aboriginal all the way through... (Keeffe, quoted in Hollinsworth 1992a: 142)

As Andrew Lattas suggests, there are different forms of essentialism: 'our [white-written] essentialism, which is part of a structure of domination, is not the same as the essentialism operating in a structure of resistance'

(Lattas, 1992b:  162).  That this is the case becomes clear when cinema's insistence on black Aboriginality is addressed.  Mudrooroo Nyoongah states that 'I fail to agree with the dismissal of the "essentialist" approach, especially when this is a position held by many Aborigines' (Nyoongah, 1992:  156).  This is both understandable and defensible when Aboriginal arguments about genetic descent are enabling in character, offering:

> the Aboriginal child, who initially experiences himself as having to be
> alienated from his [not black] body and his identity...a new way of imagining
> himself with a more unified and indivisible body (Lattas, 1992b:  162)

However, this is not always the way in which discourses of biological determinism work within understandings of Aboriginal colour and authenticity.  The essentialism which makes sense of Aboriginality-as-blackness, the signifying chain current in the cinema, is a rigorous one which understands percentage of culture as related to percentage of genetic inheritance, and thus to perceptible skin colour.  The discourse is unforgiving in its assertions that Aboriginality is in fact a visible quantity: 'the  scientific equation was, until recently, the fuller the blood, the darker the skin, the closer to barbarism, savagery, heathenness' (Tatz, 1992:  77).

This strict essentialism has proven politically disabling for Aboriginal people, invoked to deny the identity of those who are not immediately visible as members of 'authentic' Aboriginal society.  A potent example of this tendency comes in the controversy surrounding Tom Haydon's documentary *The Last Tasmanian* (1978).  Working with precisely this model of dark skin as the guarantor of genetically authentic Aboriginality, the voice-over in Haydon's film explicitly states that because modern Tasmanians no longer have such dark skin, there are no real Aborigines on the island.  Writing by Anne Bickford (1979a) and Bobbi Sykes (1979) makes clear that the film's dismissal of Tasmanian Aboriginality bears little relation to the situation of those inhabitants of the island who do in fact identify as being of Aboriginal descent.  By denying their identities through ideas of genetic and authentic Aboriginality, the film promotes a colour-centred discourse which denies these people any political leverage[2].

Another problematic issue related to colour is the implication of colour-terminology for Aboriginal identification. A cinema which presents Aboriginality as 'black' is only part of wider series of discourses in which Aboriginal people publicly identify themselves as 'black', 'coloured' and 'dark people' (Carter, 1988: 74). As Lattas suggests, the insistent conceptualisation of Aborigines as black presents an alienating situation for those indigenous people who are not dark-skinned. An identity which asserts itself as 'black' creates a strange space for light-skinned Aborigines. As an Aboriginal man from Adelaide says to Jerry Schwab, 'It's easier being black if you're black' (Schwab, 1988: 95). Suggested in this striking comment are the exclusions implied, and the parameters of authenticity suggested, by the equation of Aboriginality and skin colour.

## A.1.6

'On what theoretical grounds can one defend the claim that to look is to express power?' (David Bordwell, 1989: 251)

As well as these specific histories of Aboriginality and its relationship with visual signifiers of difference, it is also possible to argue for understandings of cinema itself as in some sense a colonial medium: involving a colonial gaze which is necessarily involved in an expression of white power over indigenous populations.

Without resorting to theories of the cinematic 'apparatus' (Baudry, 1985), material histories already begin to suggest the close relationship which has existed between this medium and the colonial project. Walter Saunders, for example, notes that:

> ...[t]he first flickering images captured on film of life in Australia were about indigenous people. These images of Murray Islanders heralded the birth of the Australian film industry in 1898 through an ethnographic film by Alfred Cort Haddon (Saunders, 1993: 4).

Similarly, Michael Leigh's history of Aboriginality and film draws the industry close to colonialism:

> Australian cinema has shown a keen interest in Aborigines since its
> beginnings in the 1890s.  To date, a staggering 6,000 or more films have been
> made about Aborigines...[The] connection between scholars, churches and
> Aborigines in the Australian cinema dates from the birth of this cinema and
> continues until the present — scholars and missionaries being responsible for
> creating the greatest proportion of the enormous bulk of films on Aborigines
> since 1898...(Leigh, 1988:  79, 80)

In this way, it is possible to suggest that historically cinema has been, in
the most literal and obvious sense, a 'colonial' medium.  However,
beyond such arguments, there also stands in film theory a now familiar
series of arguments about the filmic apparatus, and the 'gaze' which it
instates.  To look is to express power; to be looked at is to be powerless:
these are arguments constructed around 'visual imperialism' (Kuehnast,
1992).

In their call for a contextually sensitive account of race in film and
television, Robert Stam and Louise Spence suggest the need for post-
colonial film criticism to 'make the same kind of methodological leap
effected by feminist criticism...[to] pose questions concerning the apparatus,
the position of the spectator' (Stam and Spence, 1983:  3).  The leap to
which they refer is presumably that made by Laura Mulvey, in her
germinal article 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema':  a piece
which popularised the notion of the 'gaze' in the arena of film theory
(Mulvey, 1989a and 1989b).  Originally formulated in relation to the
presentation of women in classical Hollywood cinema, Mulvey's writing
works from a psychoanalytic base to suggest that an understanding of the
sexual pleasure which can be taken from looking, can usefully be related to
questions of power; and thus applied to the cinematic situation.  A useful
comparison between voyeurism and cinema viewing, she argues, can be
made around the act of: 'taking other people as objects, subjecting them to
a controlling and curious gaze' (Mulvey, 1989a:  16).

Although Mulvey's originary work speaks in specifically sexual terms, the
understanding of the cinematic 'apparatus' which it offers (the call of
Stam and Spence seems to work from Baudry's concept [Baudry, 1985],
through a reading of Mulvey to allow for a totalising description of the

function of cinema as a medium) proves amenable to use in the context of post-colonial writing, concerned with the relations of power between colonising and colonised communities.  As Ian and Tamsin Donaldson suggest in their book *Seeing the First Australians* (1985a), 'ways of seeing often reflect relationships of power' (1985b: 15).  Such an idea is a commonsensical one for post-colonial writing.  For instance, it can be seen underlying the comments of Homi K Bhabha:  'colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and *visible*' (Bhabha, 1983: 23, emphasis added).  Similarly, James Clifford suggests that when 'cultures are prefigured visually', they are inevitably thought of as 'objects' or 'texts' (quoted, Muecke, 1992:  185).

Post-colonial writing, then, intersects seductively with film theory in a way that proffers the idea of the 'gaze' as an attractive way to talk about looking and power.  But as David Bordwell points out in his detailed examination of film theory, many of the commonplaces of such criticism cannot be 'proved' — certainly, under the rigorously exclusive definition of 'theory' he provides — and the articulation of the look with positions of power has not been 'proved'.  It is certainly possible to provide suggestive examples to stabilise such a belief.  Richard Dyer appeals to everyday experience when writing on gendered looking:  '"One of the things I really envy about men", a friend said to me, "is the right to look"' (Dyer, 1982: 61).  From another perspective, a Foucauldian model might be invoked.  Working from the relatively uncontentious statement that 'knowledge is power', the concept of the Panopticon has shown that the ability to look at people involves precisely that knowledge, and that power (Foucault, 1977).  This appears to offer a link between looking and power.  (This analogy is not precise.  The power of the Panopticon system relies on the effect of being looked at on those who are watched.  Film is not directly equivalent, because the pro-filmic event is not being watched in the same way, or at least is looked at for only relatively short periods of time; and indeed, what happens before the camera is often fabricated).

**A.1.7**

It is not obvious, despite these citations, that to look is always and
necessarily to express power. If to be represented visually is to be
objectified, then all peoples placed on filmic images are open to being
consumed as objects. What is perhaps more important — and just as
relevant to filmic situations — is the denial of the right to speak. It is
possible to find, in the insistence on *looking* at Aborigines which is
apparent in cinema's representation of Australia's indigenous inhabitants,
a worrying tendency. For not only are Aborigines often presented to be
looked at; they are simultaneously speechless. It is this combination —
intensely visible and yet relentlessly silent — that forcibly engages
relationships of power. Cinema showing Aborigines as intensely visible is
*part* of a process of denying subjectivity to Aboriginal people; of presenting
them as objects; suggesting that they lack human consciousness or self-
knowledge.

It is simple to demonstrate by example that the lack of speech need not, in
cinema or in life, result in objectification. The suggestion of subjectivity
without aural communication is allowed in films from *The Wind* (Victor
Sjostrom, 1927) to *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993); and as will be argued
in later chapters, occurs in Aboriginal performance in feature films
(Chapter C.3) and the Aboriginal playing of sports (Chapter C.4). However,
the denial of speech is an insistent concern of post-colonial theory, and
one which is closely linked with denial of subjectivity. Gayatri
Chakravorty Spivak states fearlessly that '[t]he subaltern cannot speak'
(Spivak, 1988: 308). Similarly, Edward Said's portrait of Orientalism
includes a sketch of the mythical Orient, which been constructed as the
'silent Other' (Said, 1985: 5); for him, Orientalist discourses imply that
colonised groups cannot speak for themselves, and '[t]hey must therefore
be represented by those who know more about [the Other] than [it] knows
about itself' (Said, 1985: 7). Similarly, in his survey of racism in Western
cultures, Robert Miles finds it to be a recurring obsession from Greco-
Roman times onwards that 'barbarians' lack the capacity for 'intelligible

speech and reason' (Miles, 1989: 14).  In these arguments, the last two qualities — speech and reason — are understood to be directly linked.

The image of the silent Aborigine is as a common a one in cinema as is the dark-skinned native.  In *Quigley Down Under* (David Wincer, 1990), *Burke and Wills* (Graeme Clifford, 1985), *Frog Dreaming* (Brian Trenchard Smith, 1985), *Where the Green Ants Dream* (Werner Hertzog, 1984), *The Dreaming* (Mario Andreacchio, 1988), *Backlash* (Bill Bennett, 1986), and in *Kadaicha* (James Bogle, 1988), Aboriginal characters appear, but remain silent and thus mysterious.  In some earlier films, this Aboriginal inability to speak is made even more explicit.  For example, in *Uncivilised*, a 'tribe' of savage Aborigines features prominently.  The roles are played by Aborigines, but they have no dialogue, beyond an inarticulate chanting.  When it is necessary for an Aboriginal character (the witch doctor) to speak, the part is played by a white man in blackface[3].  To an audience, it is obvious that this is the case; and once again, the Aboriginal is rendered voiceless, spoken for by the coloniser.

In combination, these aspects of presentation — an insistence on communicating the Aboriginal in terms not only visual, but physical and superficial; and a refusal of Aboriginal speech, thus a refusal of self-articulation and subjectivity — work to partake of a colonial project which insists on the 'objectification' of the Other.  In this, cinema's ability to rely on, and insistence on relying on, visual signifiers to communicate information such as racial descent contributes to a colonial project, a gaze which constructs, as Bhabha fears, a colonised group as visible, inarticulate and yet immediately knowable.

## A.1.8

Cinema then, with a hierarchy of textual features which privileges the visual over the aural, has effectively contributed to a history of colonial thought.  This is not as true of television.

In part this may simply be due to lack of interest.  Relatively little has been written on Aboriginal representation in 'settler' broadcast television, and

the only substantial work on the area comes as part of Andrew Jakubowicz's work on ethnicity and the media more generally (1994). Indeed, as noted above, television has been the focus of little academic work on Aboriginal representation.

Also, television is a newer form. With a history of at least a hundred years (the centenary was celebrated in Australia in 1995), cinema can be written into the colonial project simply because it has historically been involved in explicitly colonial work (see for example the 'mission films' described by Michael Leigh [1988] and the Aboriginal motivational films addressed in the work of Catriona Moore, [1984]). By contrast, television is a relative newcomer. Regular television broadcasting, and certainly reception of television by most of the Australian landmass, is historically aligned more with policies of Aboriginal integration or self-determination than with earlier projects of assimilation.

There is another possibility, however. It may be that the critical approaches which propose a cinematic 'gaze' as part of colonial project have failed to posit television as a colonial medium because the texts and modes of spectatorship involved in the broadcast medium are not so easily written into relations of looking and power. As Ellis writes, while the conditions of spectatorship in cinema allow for discussion of a 'gaze', the television viewer is engaged more through a 'glance' (Ellis, 1982: 50). As suggested above, television can be understood as conveying information primarily via aural means. What are the implications of the different forms of spectatorship for the presentation of Aboriginality on this medium?

Sketching out a brief history of Aboriginal faces on television, it quickly becomes apparent that dark skin is less insistently a requirement of this medium. The presenters of *First in Line* (Michael Johnson and Rhoda Roberts) and *Blackout* (Clayton Lewis, Aaron Pedersen) are none of them as dark-skinned as Gulpilil. Ernie Dingo is visibly Aboriginal, but even his image does not signify the 'authentic' Aborigine to the degree of, for example, David Ngoombujarra. These well-known faces of primarily televisual Aboriginal celebrities do not insistently signal Aboriginality in the way that is most often true of cinema. The fact of their Aboriginal

identity is communicated in the television programs in which they appear; but this does not necessarily occur in terms of immediately visible signifiers such as skin colour.  These are textual differences; it is differing spectatorial regimes which make them possible, and which will reinforce their interpretation.

The space between filmic and televisual representations of the Aboriginal can be made clear through a metaphorical account of differences in the signifying practices of texts in the two media.  *Big Country*  (ABC, 1968-1987, 1991-1992) is series of documentaries concerned with 'Australian rural life' (Harrison, 1994:  141).  One program, entitled 'The Legend of Jimmie Governor' (1977), presents a behind-the-scenes look at the making of the film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*.

In ways typical of Australian representation of Aboriginality, this documentary renders indigenous speakers inarticulate.  While Thomas Keneally and Fred Schepisi are allowed to present their thoughts in soliloquies direct to the camera, Tommy Lewis must be mediated through a (white) interviewer.  Keneally is allowed to make unchallenged the claim that one particular scene of his book is 'fictional', thus implicitly granting him the power to deem other parts of the feature film 'truth'; and so on.  Most interesting, though, is the way in which this documentary uncovers representations of Aboriginality in Schepisi's film.

The behind-the-scenes shots of Aboriginal performers on the set of *Chant* include some which show these actors being blacked-up with dark make-up.  These images are presented without any voice-over commentary, as though there were nothing strange about this process.  They make obvious the fact that, even with Schepisi's intention to cast actors who would signify their racial descent in a visual way, the actors' visible Aboriginality was not sufficiently blatant.  It is therefore necessary for an extra signifying element — black make-up — to be added.  This act suggests that the blackness which represents Aboriginality can be separated from Aborigines themselves — these are Aboriginal actors whose skin is being darkened — and applied as a separate layer of make-up.  The signifier of the identity is dislocated from the individuals who live that identity.

Whereas *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* will simply present the blackness, yet again, as sufficient indicator of the Aboriginal, the television documentary 'Legend of Jimmie Governor' makes the process of creating this signifier itself *visible*.  The making-up is shown; the colour can be seen as make-up on the actors' faces even when the job is completed.  It is visible, obviously fake, on the television documentary, as it is not in the film.  This distinction occurs due to the different lighting in the two texts; and the fact that the make-up is seen being applied, thus priming the audience to look for it in later shots.  Also, the presence of the 'real' Aborigines in this behind-the-scenes programs provide a reference: Tommy Lewis is also interviewed without any darkening makeup.

Aboriginality in the television documentary, then, is not necessarily signified by blackness.  Lewis's skin, in these interviews, is not seen to be as dark as it will be in the film.  And yet Aboriginality is by no means absent.  Lewis' descent is made clear by the program's theme, by the voice over, by what Lewis says for himself.  Television allows the quality of Aboriginality to be presented in ways that are not primarily visual.

## A.1.9

A distinction can be drawn, then, between cinematic and televisual Aboriginalities.  The former is communicated largely in visual terms, for an audience paying close attention to the screen.  The latter offers possibilities for revealing Aboriginality in other ways, for spectators who may be interpreting programs from another room.  These different textual hierarchies offer possibilities for Aboriginalities signified in ways other than the purely visual: and in relation to these possibilities, the example of  Stan Grant, presenter of Channel Seven's nightly infotainment/current affairs show *Real Life*  from 1991 to 1994, is instructive.

Grant is not immediately, visually obvious as Aboriginal.  His skin is lighter, his features not as typical of what settler Australia thinks of as 'authentically' Aboriginal.  One journalist claims that: 'Grant's exotic features look more Spanish or Latin American' (Gagliardi, 1992: 3).  When

watching him on Channel Seven, the spectator does not see Stan Grant's appearance insistently communicating Aboriginality.

But as suggested above, the lack of visual signifiers of race may not be of primary importance in this medium, and it is possible for Grant's Aboriginality to be communicated in other ways. *Real Life* is an example of a typical 'broadcast form', the current-affairs show. Examining the texts of the program, and bearing in mind the suggestions of Jane Root on television spectating practices, it seems plausible to suggest that the program relies on sound to communicate information far more than is the case with cinematic texts. While it is true that visual features of the program work to retain attention — employing flashy graphics and shock pictures — these visuals are often largely redundant in terms of presenting necessary information. Often they are tautological, repeating information already made available on the soundtrack. In this context, how is Stan Grant's Aboriginality communicated?

It might be fair to say that in the text of *Real Life* itself, Grant's racial identity is not communicated in any way. It is perfectly possible that several months' worth of episodes could be viewed, without any unambiguous information on this subject being communicated. In his introductions to stories, his interrogation of politicians and his comments on events, Grant rarely finds it relevant to mention his own descent. This is a generically recognisable trait. The anchorperson of news and current affairs stands as a non-person, one whose subjectivity is so objective and unbiased as to deny subjectivity at all.

However, at the same time it must be noted that Stan Grant's Aboriginality is a popular public fact. It is well-known and widely communicated. This process relies more on secondary texts than on his own television appearances: 'Stan, an Aborigine born in Griffith, NSW...' (Brown, 1992); '[Grant] is a strange breed, part Aborigine, part cowboy, part James Dean...' (Dempsey, 1992: 36); 'Grant is the Aborigine who hosts Real Life' (Nicklin, 1992: 38); 'Stan Grant, an Aboriginal...' (Sadlier, 1992); 'Grant is an unusual choice. He is Aboriginal, younger and less experienced than his rivals...' (Cameron, 1992); 'The fact is, that I identify as an Aboriginal person...It's what I am, and proud to be' (Grant, in Philip

McLean, 1991); 'He is the first Aborigine to anchor a prime-time program in Australia' (Sandra McLean, 1991); 'Stan Grant is proud to be an Aborigine' (McBride, 1993: 14); Grant has 'overcome disadvantages without severing racial ties' (Hickson, 1994: 22). In short, to the degree that the program itself finds Stan Grant's racial identity irrelevant, associated journalistic discourses centralise and insist on it.

Other secondary discourses which mention Grant's Aboriginality begin to suggest the central point of this chapter. In a 1993 episode of the Aboriginal magazine program *Blackout*, covering the official opening of the Year of Indigenous Peoples, Stan Grant is shown speaking, mentioning briefly his Aboriginality and his approval for the event. The Aboriginal identity which television does not communicate in visual terms is here raised and promulgated via Grant's own speech.

On the rare occasions when Grant's Aboriginal descent is figured in *Real Life*, it is similarly published by his own voice. In one edition of the program, Grant interviews an American activist. That man, a representative of a far-right white-supremacist party, voices explicitly racist opinions. During the interview, Grant presents verbally what is not signified visually: he tells the man that he, Grant, is in fact an Aborigine. The anger this causes the interviewee is less important than the fact that this is one of the few occasions on which Grant's Aboriginality is communicated by the text of *Real Life* (Langton, 1993: 22). Umberto Eco has suggested the importance of a distinction between conscious and unconscious signs: 'many semioticians wonder whether medical symptoms, animal imprints, or unintentional body movements are to be considered as signs', he notes, before deciding that he believes discernment is necessary, as the two types of signs communicate in different ways (Eco, 1977: 112).

The subjects of semiotics, the signs with which Eco is concerned, are those which are understood to communicate information. The act of communication implies an exchange between conscious minds that is at some level reciprocal. When Stan Grant says: 'I am an Aborigine', he is making a statement that implies personal identification, and control of his own identity. Such speech involves an assertion of subjectivity. By

contrast, the Aboriginal identity of dark skin is, to use Eco's potent terminology, an 'animal imprint'. Of itself, it implies no consciousness, and no awareness of the identity claimed. It can be interpreted as unconscious and uncontrolled: it need not be seen as involving any will, any volition, or any understanding of self.

Television, then has offered an arena in which it is possible to present an Aboriginality which talks but is not seen, in direct contrast to that of cinema (seen but not heard). When *Neighbours* (Channel 10, 1986) features the character of 'Sally' (Brenda Webb), storylines deal with her Aboriginal identity and negotiations with her extended Aboriginal family, but visually, Sally is not signified as Aboriginal. Contextual discourses assure the viewer that the Webb is indeed Aboriginal; but her physical appearance is generically legible more easily as a beautiful young person typical of the Grundy production, than as an 'authentic' Aborigine.

Again, in the 1995 season of *Blackout*, an explicitly Aboriginal magazine program, one presenter, Michelle White, is pale skinned, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She stands as visually non-Aboriginal, in the terms commonly employed in settler-discourse. But again, she asserts her identity vocally, in a discussion precisely of prejudice about looks and authenticity.

The modes of spectatorship involved in making meaning from television texts allow for different understandings of Aboriginality. Aboriginal individuals on television — Rhoda Roberts on *Vox Pop* (SBS, 1986, Roberts since 1991), Ernie Dingo on *The Great Outdoors* (Channel Seven, 1993), Aaron Pederson on *Gladiators* (Channel Seven, 1995) — these Aboriginal performers are not signified as Aboriginal primarily in visual terms. Rather, the identities they choose to articulate must necessarily be perceived as conscious ones.

The Aboriginality of such light-skinned indigenous presenters also begins to work against genetic notions of the Aboriginal. Discourses which demand that Aboriginality be physically obvious, as Tatz suggests above, are necessarily linked to biological notions of identity. By contrast, the information occasionally communicated in *Real Life* about Stan Grant's

Aboriginal descent suggests an Aboriginality which, in Grant's physical presence, does not have dark skin.  This message may be rejected, or negotiated, by television spectators (readings can be made disbelieving the presenter's identification), but it is undoubtedly available.  It begins to suggest other ways of understanding Aboriginal identity: ways that rely on cultural more than genetic definitions of the term.

## A.1.10

These programs, it might seem, present the ultimate examples of the non-visual Aborigine in televisual forms.  However, there is another, even more interesting group of productions in this area: those programs in which white actors play Aboriginal roles, without any make-up or any attempt to signify visually the Aboriginal descent of the characters.

In the pilot episode of *Bony* (Grundy, 1992) and the mini-series *Jackeroos* (Crawfords, 1993), white actors play Aborigines (Cameron Daddo playing the eponymous role in the former, David McCubbin as hero Jack Simmonds in the latter).  Obviously such practices are worrying.  The publicly circulated 'white' identity of at least the first of these actors raises embarrassing questions about the inability of Aborigines to represent themselves — once again recalling Said's Silent Other.  At the same time, the industrial implications of whites playing Aboriginal roles is problematic — there are few enough parts for Aboriginal actors in the first place, as Colin McKinnon, the 'chairman' of the Aboriginal Actors' Corporation 'Koori Access to Television and Film' course, points out (Perera, 1995: 12).

For this work though, it remains fascinating that these white actors could play Aboriginal parts without any recourse to makeup.  Television, a medium whose texts do not insist on the primacy of the visual, and whose associated modes of spectatorship similarly allow for modes of consumption which do not insist on the gaze, finds it possible to signify the Aboriginal in dialogue and narrative, without any visual component.

In addressing the ways in which audiences will make sense of Aboriginality in Australian films and television programs, the relative levels of attention to visual and aural codes in socially sanctioned viewing practices are immediately relevant.  The less sustained 'gaze' of broadcast television allows for quite different — less essentialist, less 'authentically' informed, and less inarticulate — versions of Aboriginal identity to be communicated.

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1  See, for example, Horace Newcomb's arguments about the difference in meaning-status between the visual presentation of landscape in filmic and televisual Westerns (Newcomb, 1979b:  424).  Critical assertions of the dominance of image in the meaning-making processes associated with film would include Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow (1977:  57), and Vijay Mishra (1989); while John Fiske and John Hartley suggest that television texts are function according to an 'oral logic' (1978:  112).  Also consider the way in which BBC television programs such as *Yes Minister* can be released on audio tape, in only minimally adapted versions.  In this form, they remain eminently meaningful, in a way that soundtrack releases from films (which present only the music) are not.  Similarly, the success of programs originally written for the radio — *Whose Line is it Anyway?, After Henry* — is telling.  Indeed, the quintessentially broadcast drama form, the soap opera, is historically derived from radio.  Finally, two familiar phrases point to expected parameters of the media.  'Radio with pictures' describes much television output, and particularly that in 'broadcast forms', suggesting a reliance of the medium on aural communication of information.  Similarly, the exhortation for film writers to 'show, not tell', points towards a visual — a cinematic — means of providing information.

2  In relation to this particular 'controversy' of Aboriginal identity and political effectivity, see also Daniels and Murmane (1978); Mansell (1978); Milliken (1978); Haydon (1979); Bickford (1979b); and the fully worked-through rebuttal of Steve Thomas' 1992 film, *Black Man's Houses*.

3 Blackface represents the final evolution of the above logic. In this
process, Aboriginality is represented by dark skin, and nothing more.
The identity is reduced to no more than a layer of black colouring,
separate even from the individuals who live that identity.

# Chapter A.2: Banality

## A.2.1

Television is a banal medium. Film is not.

This is the second of the distinctions this thesis will address between the modes of spectatorship brought to film and broadcast television. Once again, these modes are avowed generalisations. Once again, the generalisations prove useful in understanding the distinct possibilities for textual production in the two media; and the different ways in which they may be consumed.

> Cinema revolves around the purchase of the right to attend a performance of a single film text, the performance is public...Broadcast television emits a series of signals that are available to anyone who possesses or rents a television set...[and] is received overwhelmingly in domestic surroundings...Broadcast television is intimate and everyday, a part of home life rather than any kind of special event (Ellis, 1982: 111, 113)

Using this model, and bearing in mind the complex series of relations between industries, texts and audiences implied in the term 'spectatorship', the argument in this chapter will be that television spectatorship is an everyday event[1]. The status of the medium allows for the texts of broadcast television to be consumed with a sense of familiarity that is not true of typical cinematic regimes of spectatorship. Television texts (including, in this context, television scheduling as part of the medium's textual material) in typical broadcast forms, can promote a sense of banality less available in films. Cinema works rather to create a sense of occasion, both through material conditions of spectatorship, and in the texts produced for the medium.

The everyday of which television viewing is a part, is '...the world "within reach"...[that which] appears as normal and self-evident' (Selberg, 1993: 4).

It is '...the familiar world...a world unquestioningly accepted as normal, a world in which a general framework is taken for granted (Rogge and Jensen, 1988: 89). As Henri Lefebvre, a writer whose use of the term has become the focus of much recent critical attention (de Certeau, 1984; Kaplan and Kristin, 1987) suggests, it is the space of 'furniture, objects and the world of objects, time-tables, news items and advertisements' (Lefebvre, 1971: 27). In short, '[e]veryday life [is]..."whatever remains after one has eliminated all specialised activities"'(Kaplan and Ross, 1987: 2).

Cinema is a specialised activity. Television is 'whatever remains'. It is an everyday object and an everyday practice (Silverstone, 1995). This implies, as suggested above, that the mode of spectatorship involved in the consumption of this medium is a familiar, a normal, a cosy — finally, a banal — one. Henri Lefebvre invokes the term 'banality' in his own description of the everyday world (Lefebvre, 1987: 9), but in the arena of cultural studies, the term also has more specialised uses. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard has delineated as 'banal' a realm which is similar to Lefebvre's everyday (both are worlds of objects, for example); but whose implications are more obviously relevant to this work (Baudrillard, 1990; 1993). The banal is the place of everyday life (Morris, 1990: 14). It is the realm of familiarity, boredom, and — importantly — meaninglessness. Concomitantly, Baudrillard suggests another realm, the place of the not-banal, the not-everyday — of the 'fatal'. This is a place of 'pure event' (Baudrillard, 1990: 72)[2], a literal, dangerous, and catastrophic realm (Morris, 1990: 19), a space which is sublime, and, ultimately *meaningful*.

These terms — banality and fatality — prove productive in mapping cinema's and television's representations of Aboriginality.

## A.2.2

Working from initial descriptions of television spectatorship as an everyday practice, and film viewing as precisely that kind of 'specialised practice' which takes place outside of the familiarity of the everyday arena, it is possible to align the modes of spectatorship for the two media with

the terms of Baudrillard's models: the one banal, the other fatal.  The
material apparatus of television reception is a banal object ('furniture').
The practice of consuming the texts is an everyday activity.  Television
produces (and schedules) texts which can be read as familiar, reliable, and
known.  Lefebvre's category of 'the everyday', including as it does both
activities and objects (1971) allows for descriptions of both television
viewing and television texts as banal.

Cinema-going is, by contrast, not an everyday event.  Jeffrey Richards
describes the spectatorship of cinema in the 1930's, when the medium's
status as marked off from the humdrum life of familiar existence was at its
most obvious.  His descriptions remain valid, in a diluted form, for the
modern experience of watching films.  The cinema itself, he suggests was a
place where 'people went...to be taken out of themselves and their lives
for an hour or two...' (Richards, 1984:  1).  He cites sociologist Seebohm
Rowntree's belief that:

> ...a working woman, bored to death by a never-ending round of humdrum
> household chores, or a factory worker oppressed by the monotony of his
> work, can be transplanted...into a world of romance or high adventure
> (quoted in Richards, 1984: 23).

Cinematic spectatorial practices are not banal.  They allow for the
production of reactions and interpretations which partake of a quality
which may be described as awe.  The text can be imposing, sublime,
transcendent, meaningful.  The event of interpreting a film is explicitly
marked off from the banal flow of the everyday.

Cinematic texts work with such expectations to produce narratives which
are more fatal — more tragic, more operatic, constructed on a grander scale
— than is the case for television texts.  In the context of this work, film
production in Australia has responded to the possibilities offered by this
regime of spectatorship by producing films in which Aboriginality is
consistently fatal: both literally, and in the wider sense suggested by the
work of Baudrillard.  It is sublime, threatening, dangerous: and, above all,
*meaningful.*

In *The Naked Country* (Burstall, 1985), Mundaru (Tommy Lewis) warns 'Boss Dillon' (John Stanton) that his cattle are trespassing on Aboriginal land. The white man ignores the warning. When an Aboriginal hunting group then come upon his prize bull, they spear it, and begin to hack the animal to death. Dillon and his stockhands ride in to try to stop this, and one of the Aboriginal hunters throws a spear. It smacks into the back of one whitefella, and is shown in close-up piercing his body. A brief, frenetic action sequence follows, culminating in another spear being thrown. A mid-shot shows the agony of Dillon as the wood bursts through his shoulder, a ragged edge protruding from skin and cloth, covered in blood. He then escapes.

Stranded in the bush, he turns native. He takes off his shirt and begins to eat bush tucker. As part of this process of becoming Aboriginal, he takes up a spear, and starts to hunt his attackers. One he spears through the neck, in a shock close-up which shows the handle of the weapon bursting through the Aboriginal flesh. Another he drowns, forcing the man's face underwater and shoving his windpipe against a submerged branch. At the same time, the Aboriginal man who lead the initial attack is tracked by Kadaicha men of his own tribe, in retribution for breaking marriage taboos. The woman he has eloped with is killed with a heavy wooden spear, which is shown entering her naked torso with a heavy thump, going between her breasts and right through her body. The Kadaicha men then slice Mundaru's skin, in a detailed close-up, and force a kadaicha stone into his bleeding flesh. A shot of his face shows him screaming.

The white police turn up. The first is speared in the neck with another thick wooden weapon. A medium shot ensures that the agony on his face can be seen, as well as the spear entering the flesh. The next shot, a close-up, shows him lying on the ground, struggling to pull the jagged wood out of his neck. The other policeman wrestles a second Kadaicha man to the ground and breaks his neck, only to be speared himself. Another close-up shows his head lolling as he dies.

Dillon finds the dying Mundaru. The Aborigine says that he killed the white men because 'You think sacred places are just a bit of land'. 'No I don't', snarls Dillon. 'Not now'. He has discovered the realm of the

'sacred', in the fatal, transcendental world of pain, suffering and death which Aboriginality has shown him. When Mundaru begs to be killed 'like a warrior', Dillon now accepts this Aboriginal way of conducting life. Abandoning the white decorum he has already been distanced from, he lifts a bloody knife (seen in close-up) and thrusts it into the Aboriginal man's stomach.

Literally fatal representations of the Aboriginal abound in the cinema. From the accounts Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, it seems that the use of the Aboriginal figure in early Australian cinema may fairly be characterised in this way. Indeed, their work on these films suggests that the threatening and dangerous Aboriginal group was the dominant image of Australia's indigenous inhabitants in early cinema (Pike and Cooper, 1981)[3]. But such tropes are not restricted to the distant history of Aboriginal representation. *The Naked Country* provides a spectacular but not atypical example of the way in which cinematic texts produce suitable occasions for awe in their construction of a vicious and violent Aboriginality. Aboriginal people (or spirits) kill (others or themselves) in many more recent Australian films. *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1955) and *Bitter Springs* (Smart, 1950) both feature murderous Aborigines. *Walkabout* (Roeg, 1971), which begins the Australian-film-renaissance's representation of the Aboriginal, features an Aboriginal man who finally kills himself; *The Last Wave* (Weir, 1977) is centred around the court case of an Aboriginal man accused of murder; *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Schepisi, 1978) is another widely-circulated example of Aboriginal fatality; in *The Fringe Dwellers* (Beresford, 1986), the heroine murders her own child; in *Black River* (Lucas, 1993), the heroine's son has died in custody before the film begins; *Blackfellas* (Ricketson, 1993) is a picture of despairing Aboriginal urban existence, one that includes crime, drugs, corruption — and ultimately murder; in *Kadaicha* (Bogle, 1988), an Aboriginal spirit kills teenage children; in *The Dreaming* (Andreacchio, 1988) a similar spirit murders and disembowels activists and husbands alike; *Backroads* (Noyce, 1977), ends with a shooting; *Tudawali* (Jodrell, 1987), likewise with a violent death; *Deadly* (Storm, 1991), is predicated on a violent death in custody; *Ground Zero* (Pattinson, 1987), is a film about

investigating, and finally revealing, a mass Aboriginal death; and so on, and so on.  In all of these films, Aboriginality is linked with death.

It is important that the above list focuses not only on representations of the murdering Aborigine, but on the ways in which Aboriginality is linked with death more generally.  This is the potency of Baudrillard's fatality.  The suggestion is not that Aborigines are portrayed as vicious, violent killers.  Rather, the Aborigine (whether as perpetrator or as victim) is linked to death; to the realm of the fatal, something which finally *matters*, steps outside of the humdrum everyday experience of life to become meaningful and truly challenging.  Such is the stuff of cinema. Cinema makes such stuff of Aborigines.

In this, at least one aspect of cinema's fatal Aboriginality proves congruent with other texts to construct wider understandings of the meaningfulness accorded to Aboriginal people.  Baudrillard turns to the term 'fatal' in contrast to the banal because the affective, corporeal shock of death best illustrates all that is not familiar or everyday.  The horror of Aboriginal violence, so often directly related to death, *matters*.  Andrew Lattas has traced a history of the 'iconography of evil' in the Australian imaginary which consistently places Aborigines in such a role.  He quotes newspaper articles which describe a native group killing a man:

> One of the murderers first felled him by a blow on the head — another cut his
> throat, cleaved his breast-bone with his tomahawk and ripped his body open
> from the neck to the lower extremity of the belly.  The next operation was to
> sever the fat from the entrails, with which they began to anoint themselves,
> singing one of their songs of victory at the same time....Then they knocked out his
> teeth...lacerated his skull and visage...began to cut the flesh from his
> bones...(quoted in Lattas, 1987:  43)

This fatality, which can also be traced in the insistence of contemporary news media on looking for violence in Aboriginal stories (Jennett, 1983), or even on manufacturing links between Aboriginality and crime (Mickler, 1992), is interesting not only for revealing the fear of Aboriginality.  These stories also insist on indigenous identity as being

something that is not banal: something that is dangerous, threatening: fatal.

### A.2.3

The naming of this fatality — a cultural attitude which marks the search for something meaningful, something which exists outside the perceived indifference of banal, everyday, material life — allows for  another dominant aspect of cinematic Aboriginality to be linked to the representations which have gone before.  These images may be less immediately obvious as 'fatal'; but are just as much concerned with an escape from the everyday.  These are the representations of 'spiritual' Aboriginality which so haunt Australian film.

A potent moment in this history occurs in Graeme Clifford's *Burke and Wills* (1985).   Near the beginning of this film, the central characters, English explorers, are trekking through a hostile Australian desert.  The landscape is rendered threatening and strange through a series of very low camera angles, and cuts to unexpected close-ups.  These show lizards; the blazing sun; and disconnected parts of painted Aboriginal bodies.  At the end of this sequence, the Aboriginal people are briefly revealed as unified bodies; however, they then stand very still, and literally fade into the landscape — they become transparent and vanish.  Nature is rendered hostile and mysterious; Aboriginality is rendered a part of that nature.

Again, this film is in many ways typical.  *The Last Wave* represents another example of this tendency:  David Gulpilil appears in dreams, standing silent and still.  When he does choose to communicate, the information he reveals only makes more apparent the vast mystical powers of Aboriginal people as a group.  The Aborigines in *Where the Green Ants Dream* (Herzog, 1984) remain potent because of their silence, standing (or sitting) far beyond white culture, refusing to engage in the petty arguments of a white legal system.  In *The Right Stuff* (Kaufman, 1987), Aborigines are explicitly constructed as spiritual and anti-technological: as all of the technology of NASA fails to protect a returning space craft, the Aborigines of Australia build a magical fire, whose sparks

travel high into the stratosphere, enveloping and protecting the vessel.  In *Kadaicha* (Bogle, 1988) the vengeful spirit is Aboriginal; as is that of *The Dreaming* (Andreacchio, 1988).

The Aborigine as silent, mysterious, and powerful, spiritual in the sense of having supernatural powers related to the earth itself: this is the figure described under a metaphorical use of the term 'fatal'[4].  Once again, it is an intensely 'meaningful' image.  And again, this set of cinematic representations works with wider cultural constructions of the Aboriginal. Andrew Lattas notes that:

> ...the theme of having one's emptiness healed by the fullness of Aboriginal
> culture is prominent in newspaper reviews of books and art exhibitions
> dealing with Aboriginal myths and paintings of the land (Lattas, 1992: 52)

Journalistic discourses similarly present the Aboriginal presence in Australia as: 'enriching a world grown sceptical of world religions and material progress' (Beckett, 1992: 166).  In short, common (particularly journalistic) discourses of Australia's indigenous inhabitants involve themselves in a 'romanticisation of Aboriginal culture as the ancient spirituality which the West has lost' (Lattas, 1990-1991:  284).

Against the material banality of everyday life stands Aboriginal spirituality.  It becomes associated with new religions.  In relation to ecological movements, for example, it can be stated that: 'No pollution has ever been caused by Aborigines, nor any environmental hazard' (Toby Miller, 1995:  11, paraphrasing Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Downunder*); so that: 'conservation and environmental issues have meshed with the resurgence of Aboriginal culture' (Hamilton, 1990:  22) into a meaningful, almost religious, complex of ideas.

Aboriginal life is constructed as an unknowable source of spirituality for a trivial and material Western culture in other ways.  The success of Marlo Morgan's book and video *Mutant Message Downunder* (twenty-three weeks in the New York Times best-seller list in 1994 — Miller, 1995: 11) represents the incredible visibility of Aboriginality as self-help tool (in its American manifestation the self-help movement appears to have striking similarities to a religion).  Julie Marcus traces an explicit example of

Aboriginal co-option as guarantors of a modern spirituality. She describes a group of American crystal spiritualists, who believe that Uluru (in their vocabulary, Ayers Rock) is sitting on a giant crystal. This explains, they say, why the Aborigines worship it, writes their spirituality into an (excessively banal) version of the fatal, the spiritual, the transcendent (Marcus, 1988).

Australian cinema has created representations of an Aboriginality which serve a medium constructing itself as something special, as an event. Aboriginality in both its murderous and spiritual inclinations, is sublime, awe-some, and meaningful. In short, it is fatal.

## A.2.4

Television is a banal object; television spectatorship is an everyday practice. The possibility is open for texts to be made which are perceived to be familiar, known, and similar. Televisual textuality can be 'in-different' (Grossberg, 1987).

The 'everyday' is the space of the familiar. This is true in simple material terms; but in this strict sense, the everyday is a highly individualised space: it is necessarily different for each person. To talk about the everyday in a wider cultural sense, it is necessary to acknowledge that the familiar spaces of television texts are also everyday. Muriel Cantor and Suzanne Pingree, writing on a typical broadcast form (the soap opera) cite surveys of the gratifications American daytime soap opera fans consciously take from this most everyday of genres. One pleasure was that of 'companionship': 'I can share in the happiness and sorrows of the characters' (Cantor and Pingree, 1983: 128). Rather than 'identification', 'companionship' suggests texts offering the pleasure of familiarity, the reliability of simply being there. Addressing a spectator who finds pleasure in repetition, predictability, the same program, the same time, the same faces, the same kinds of plots, television can afford to produce texts which appeal to precisely a sense of the known. The ability to explicitly acknowledge the pleasures of familiarity and iterability is indeed characterised by Umberto Eco as the defining feature of television serial texts (Eco, 1990: 84). In such

a situation, the possibility exists to create an Aboriginality which is familiar, known, banal — in a way that has not proved true of cinematic representation.

Australian television scheduling is particularly oriented towards creating texts whose pleasures lie in exploiting an everyday spectatorship, consumption of the medium as a domestic and familiar (non-) event. The strip-scheduling of the same program over four or five nights of week is common on all five terrestrial channels, particularly in daytime and early evening slots. This programming strategy is available for a wide range of genres: children's programs (*Bananas in Pyjamas*, ABC); news and current affairs (*Eleven AM*, Channel Seven); infotainment (*Midday with Derryn Hinch*, Channel Nine); soap operas (*Neighbours*, Channel Ten); comedy (*Yes Minister*, ABC); game shows (*The Price is Right*, Channel Nine); chat shows (*Donahue*, Channel Ten); and so on.

It is patronising to suggest that the pleasures of television are solely about repetition. However, particularly in this Australian context[5], it seems clear that television spectatorship is an everyday event which does involve taking pleasure from familiarity. Scheduling certainly promotes and encourages such pleasures. Similarly, the textual matter of daily shows can well be described as addressing a banal activity with banal texts.

## A.2.6

Television texts are not so insistent on presenting fatality. The pleasures they offer can come from presenting the everyday rather than the catastrophic, the regular rather than the irregular, from known rather than unknown spaces, social situations, and characters. The pleasures of television texts can be related to such banal aspects of life as missing garden gnomes (*Neighbours*), the weather outside the window (*Nine Nightly News*), a new hair colour (*Ricky Lake*, Channel Ten, 1995), trouble with flatulence (*Live it up!*, Channel Ten, 1990), pub trivia (*Sale of the Century*, Channel Nine, 1980) or the price of a new refrigerator (*The Price is Right*, Channel Nine, 1989).

The dominant space of many these texts is the suburbs: this is the banal space of the Australian imagination. 'The suburb has always been the dominant mode of occupying this country', say Sarah Ferber et al (Ferber, Healy et al, eds, 1994: xiv), but more than this, more than simply a concrete geographical space, the suburbs form one pole in a structural opposition that lies at the heart of Australian identity. In the antonymic structure suburb/outback, the imaginary space of the former is an everyday place, familiar and known. It is the place where we live. In contrast, the harsh environment of the latter is fatal, is meaningful and, ultimately, it defines 'us' (Turner, 1994).

The dominant concern of these television texts is with the material world. They are not concerned with ideals, transcendence or questions of spirituality. The issues of importance are How much would you pay for this new sofa? Is my hair alright? and How many people surveyed said that the last thing they do before they go to sleep at night is read a book?

The material, suburban, trivial and known world is the setting of these texts, consumed on an everyday medium. What possibilities, then, do they offer for the representation of Aboriginality?

### A.2.7

In *Sale of the Century* (Grundy for Channel 9, episode broadcast 1.11.93), Ted is an Aboriginal contestant. Sitting in a studio, surrounding by silver painted flats and flashing lights, and wearing a suit, he answers questions on The Beach Boys, Morris dancing and the Vietnam war. From the celebrity board, he picks the face of young actor Noah Taylor; and he wins a variety of prizes, including a set of tableware with patterns inspired by the work of Monet, and travel accessories such as a snooze pillow and mini-hair drier.

Australian game shows are banal texts. Eminently iterable, they revel in the promotion of trivia and they openly embrace material culture. Nothing about game shows really matters. They represent the ultimate banal texts on an everyday medium[6]. Aboriginality in this form is a

fascinating quantity: one which has (unsurprisingly given the little critical attention to Australian quiz shows from any quarter) been subject to almost no analysis. A few examples suggest a genealogy which has been effaced from the critical landscape.

On *Sale of the Century*, for several episodes in November 1993, an Aboriginal contestant called Ted competes, winning at least one episode, and a charming diamond bracelet for his wife. In a later 'Celebrity' episode, Aaron Pedersen competes, wins one show, and loses another (17-21.2.95). On *Wheel of Fortune*, 27 August 1994, Ernie Dingo competes and loses. *Family Feud* features at least three Aboriginal families in recent history. They appear in episodes 249, 951 and 1012 -1013 of that program.

The presentation of Aboriginality in this banal form is a banal one. It takes place in a known world, on an everyday medium. The familiarity of that Aboriginal identity involves partaking in a series of qualities which have previously proved remarkably resistant to Aboriginality: surburbanism, materialism and triviality. In game shows, Aboriginal players can seem to be adept at participating in banal culture. In this in-difference, this similarity to various known, 'white' qualities, lies a challenge to dominant forms of Aboriginality.

> [The contestants'] individual differences — names, family circumstances, occupations and sometimes personal details such as likes and dislikes, hobbies or ambitions — are given a ritual recitation that moves them from differentiated individuals to equal competitors (Fiske, 1987: 265)

John Fiske describes the way in which game show contestants are rendered similar, written into familiar discourses of personal trivia. This is indeed the trajectory of Aboriginal presence in *Sale of the Century* and *Wheel of Fortune*. In the former, each contestant is introduced with a brief, formalised, interview. Pat talks about his golf handicap — his wish is to get it down. Amanda focuses on her family. Her dream is rather to take the children to Disneyland. When it comes to Ted's turn to be introduced, Glenn Ridge asks him, Is it true that you were the first Aboriginal head teacher in Victoria? Ted makes a modest motion with his hands, and nods, Yes, this is true. In this, Aboriginality is presented, and made banal.

It is no longer particularly different: rather, it is part of that discourse of trivia which is an identical feature of every competitor.

Similarly, Ernie Dingo is introduced on *Wheel of Fortune*, by a little banter with John Burgess. 'One of the nicest fellows around, Ernie Dingo...nice tie'. 'Home grown stuff', says Ernie. '...sort of like the Aboriginal version of Ken Done, 'cept ours has got a lot more colour...' Such an intro is structurally similar to that for Eric Banner from *Full Frontal* — 'Now you just released a new CD...it's doing OK?', asks John Burgess. Similarly, Lynn McGrainger from *Home and Away* states that 'I am a mum in real life. I do have a wonderful house husband, who cooks, cleans'. All contestants discuss careers, and personal trivia. In these comments, the difference of the competitors is effaced in a series of similar statements, rendered equally banal: Pat wants to lower his golf handicap; Amanda wants to go to Disneyland; Ted is the first Aboriginal head teacher in Victoria. These are presented as banal differences of primarily similar contestants. Aboriginal identity is asserted, in speech and to some degree visually. But that identity is not spiritual, not imposing, not in any way fatal. Ted represents the sort of Aboriginal identity that wins a 'beautiful art-deco bracelet...eighteen carat white gold, set with cut diamonds and baguette sapphires. It's valued at $15,000, from Kaminsky Galleries': Ernie presents an Aboriginality in a suit, spinning the wheel for a chance to guess that a 'famous TV Celebrity' is Rex Hunt. This is an Aboriginality that is everyday; that is banal; that is indifferent; that is meaningless (in the sense of not being instantly charged with meaning).

## A.2.8

Game shows present an Aboriginal identity which is consumed in a form and a medium which are familiar; an Aboriginal identity which is congruent with aspects of in-different, familiar culture — house-ownership, materialism, triviality, 'entertainment' itself.

As is suggested in the above examples of cinema representation, as well as wider histories of Aboriginal violence and spirituality, this is a poorly-represented Aboriginality in Australia. An Aboriginal identity which is

similar-to rather than different-from white identity, in a variety of characteristics, is surprisingly invisible. As will be suggested in Chapter C.2, there are particular historical and critical reasons for such a lack. In discourses not only journalistic and everyday, but educational and academic, an Aboriginal identity which is (to pick a few banal terms) material, suburban and salaried, is seen to be not 'really' Aboriginal. The later work will suggest that such arguments rely on a too-static conception of what Aboriginal culture is, a conception which is in fact disempowering for Aboriginal individuals. This chapter accepts that a material Aboriginality, one which exhibits a knowledge of white culture's trivia, and an interest in its consumer objects, is still an Aboriginal identity. It is no less 'authentic' than the cultures of traditionally-oriented Aboriginal groups in outback Australia (Langton, 1981; Cowlishaw, 1986).

Such a position is not commonly articulated in discursive arenas such as education, legal definitions, journalistic or even academic descriptions of the Aboriginal. Dominant trends in all of these have worked to suggest that Aboriginality is designated by cultural attributes which are mutually exclusive with white culture. Elements such as education, western dress, suburban existence, and in particular materialism, are all seen to be incommensurable with Aboriginality (materialism in the sense of capitalistic enterprise will be more fully investigated in Chapter C.2. The implication here is more of that materialism which defeats the spirituality characterising fatal Aboriginal identities):

> ..."real outback Aborigines" assume the idealised and romantic status of an
> unchanging, authentic past, whilst those Aborigines who have moved into
> European lifestyles are seen to have developed into inferior and less
> authentic selves... (Lattas, 1990-1991: 284).

Those who are involved in European lifestyles, are the 'detribalised' remnants, those who have somehow lost their Aboriginality (Langton, 1981: 16); they are 'a long way from the bush, boomerangs and didgeridoos' (Chase, 1981: 23). Legal definitions can work to confirm that some aspects of white culture are incommensurable with Aboriginal identity: in particular, suburbanism and elements of polite dress. Deidre Jordan tells

of a Perth magistrate who refused to acknowledge the Aboriginality of a man brought before him, because:

> There's no evidence of him living in a native camp, and he apparently lives at a normal address in Perth. I must also take note of his appearance. He is well dressed and well-presented... (quoted in Jordan: 1985: 31)

Because of these facts, the magistrate decides that the man is not Aboriginal. As Jordan sums up: 'Aborigines lived on reserves, at not-normal addresses, were badly dressed, and presented only negative characteristics' (Jordan, 1985: 31).

These definitions of Aboriginal authenticity are necessarily disabling for (the vast majority of) Aboriginal people who do not live lives that are immediately recognisable as fitting the 'fatal' model of inscrutability and distance (the model that is so often presented in films necessarily keen to present the 'pure event' of cinematic experience). However, it must be acknowledged that to take up elements of European culture is not to lose Aboriginal identity. As Andrew Lattas points out, it is 'naïve' to think of 'resistance and incorporation as antithetical processes...that taking up one [culture] necessarily detracts from the other' (Lattas, 1993: 241). He argues for an Aboriginal identity which functions in many ways within a recognisable white culture, but within which, specific acts (in the case of his work, drunkenness[7]) function as resistant Aboriginal practices. Similarly, Gillian Cowlishaw finds the binarism that sees 'resistance' and 'accommodation' as binary opposites to be a simplistic reduction of cultural experience (Cowlishaw: 1993: 184). It is wrong, she argues, to think of a simple choice between selling out to white culture (a banal Aboriginal identity) and maintaining a resistant, fatal Aboriginal identity which refuses even to engage with settler lifestyles. To insist on such oppositions denies the possibility that Aboriginal people can engage and negotiate with white culture and remain in any way 'Aboriginal'. In the terms of cinema, of fatal Aboriginalities, the banal identity of Ted trying to win a diamond bracelet for his wife is no longer an Aboriginal one. Of course, the fact that discourses of authenticity cannot countenance this materialistic indigeneity says more about the function of those discursive

constructions than about Ted and Ernie's game-show Aboriginal identities.

It is understandable that there is a worry about assimilation in critical writing on Aboriginality. Historically, the atrocities committed in the name of that ideal amount in practical terms to attempted genocide. However, to then invoke that term to describe any attempt by Aborigines to engage with white culture[8] is reductive. Moreover, as Stephen Muecke has noted, the idea that Aborigines should not be 'induced' into 'the dominant culture's value system' (here he is quoting Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, who are worried that Aboriginal land claims get co-opted into Australian fascination with landscape), is '...too bad for anybody who might want to be induced into such a system, for instance, by getting an education, or by running businesses...' (Muecke, 1992: 165).

**A.2.9**

The apparent misfit of Aboriginality with the triviality of game shows is a telling one. That the competitors on *Family Feud* could be claimed as possessing an Aboriginal identity just as viable as that of the silent mystics in *Where the Green Ants Dream* is immediately open to challenge by a variety of discursive approaches. This concern with denying authentic Aboriginality is often violently expressed:

> Has the absurd official definition of 'Aboriginal' helped or hindered the cause
> of advancement?...The present wide-open official definition of 'Aboriginal'
> has been a free ticket on the gravy train for a lot of publicly-funded carpet
> baggers only a whisker more Aboriginal than I am...(Peter Ryan in *The Age*,
> 11.2.1989. Quoted in David Hollinsworth, 1992a: 142)

Those who are not really Aboriginal, who are denatured by white triviality — these definitions would presumably include Aboriginal people such as Ted, those who exhibit an alarming ability to deal with the banal everyday fact of white culture. An Aboriginality which partakes of such aspects of a European lifestyle as education, suburban living, and trivial materialism,

is a disturbing one for settler conceptions of race.  The strength of reactions denying its authenticity makes this clear.

Indeed, it may be that this banal, this in-different Aboriginal identity may prove to be, not just a necessary complement to insistently fatal representations of Aboriginality, but in fact quite disruptive to the very structures of fatality and banality which have insistently placed Aborigines as meaningful, and as the source of white Australian spirituality and transcendence.

Mike Gane, commenting on Baudrillard's work, insists that: 'banal strategy...contains within itself a fatal strategy... [which is] overbanality as fate, more banal than banal' (Gane, 1991:  175).  In fact, the terms may be interchangeable as:

> Superbanality, for example, becomes fatal, and a super fatality would be banal.  It's a very simple, but when well done, dizzying logico-semantic game (Meaghan Morris, 1990:  19).

The fatal can become banal.  When Aboriginality is repeatedly represented as special, profound, silent and mystical, those representations can themselves become over-familiar: the imagined response might be one of boredom, of 'not another mystical silent Aboriginal in touch with nature, please'.  These images become 'safe', a spirituality which is kept 'somewhere else' (Hayward, 1993: 33).  Concomitantly, a banal Aboriginality may prove to be more disturbing to the dominant discourses of racial characteristics than the unchallenging repetition of fatal norms.  Theoretically, this position could be justified with reference to Jonathon Dollimore's work on perversion.  Dollimore argues, with reference to post-structuralist writing and to historical example, that to challenge dominant systems of 'normality', it may be more potent to reproduce them with only subtle 'perversions', working within the binary structures they already provide, than to attempt to ignore and move beyond them altogether (Dollimore, 1991: 219 — 227).

In terms of Australian examples, this can be illustrated with reference to the case of Sally Morgan.  Her book, *My Place*, presents one of the few popularly-circulated examples of an Aboriginal identity which is in some

ways similar to white cultural norms   Reviewing this book, alongside work by Ella Simon, Veronica Brady makes clear precisely how such a superbanality may in fact prove to be fatal to typical notions of the Aboriginal.  She suggests that:

> ...it is precisely their moderation, their acceptability, which makes their stories so powerfully troubling...as a half-caste, [Morgan] represents what white society refuses to accept about itself... (Brady, 1987:  4)

This troubling potential, the perversion of white structures and a concomitant crossing of boundaries, may prove important in dismantling structures of fatality and banality, the continual desire for Aboriginality to stand as a site of spirituality, transcendence and meaning for settler Australia.  Banal identities carry a powerful potential for disruption.

## A.2.10

Television does not have to offer its viewers 'pure event'.  The expectations built up by cinema, in the act of leaving the domestic and entering a public sphere, of purchasing a ticket for a single discrete performance, by the trailers and popcorn and the darkened room; none of these are present for television.  Rather, television as an everyday event can rather produce texts and representations whose pleasures lie in familiarity and banality.

The space for Aboriginal representation in these televisual forms is very different from that in the cinema.  When Ernie Dingo appears in *Tudawali* (Steve Jodrell, 1987), he ends up burned to death in a drunken camp fire brawl.  When he appears on *Wheel of Fortune*, he has to try to guess the name of a celebrity TV star.  In the space between these representations lie the differences in the pleasures and the possibilities opened up by the spectatorial investments in two quite different media.

1 See references in Selberg, 1993: 3; Wilson, 1991: 396; Marsden, 1980: 120; Williams and Williams, 1991: 124; Rogge and Jensen, 1988: 84.

2 The equivalent term in Lefebvre's typology might be 'style': this is the place of 'ideality' (1971: 12), and of 'truth' (13). Style is: 'a symbolic value linking [objects] to meaning at its most vast: to divinity and humanity, power and wisdom, good and evil, happiness and misery, the perennial and the ephemeral...immense values' (Lefebvre, 1987: 8).

3 Examples include films such as *A Girl of the Bush* (Franklyn Barrett, 1921); *Heritage* (Charles Chauvel, 1935); *White Death* (Edwin Bowen, 1936); and *Uncivilised* (Charles Chauvel, 1936).

4 A contradiction emerges between this chapter and the previous one: a contradiction which makes clear the danger of those simplistic interpretations of these films discussed in the introduction. Does silence represent powerlessness (objectification) or powerfulness (spirituality)? No simple answer can be given: much depends on the reading formations brought to bear on the images.

5 This would be less true in Britain, which largely avoids such strip scheduling, except for news and current affairs, and imported Australian soap operas.

6 The degree to which the meaningless nature of game shows is suited to the spectatorial regimes of broadcast television can be rendered obvious via of the consideration of the ways in which game shows are written into films: focusing on industry-wide scandals (*Quiz Show*, Robert Redford, 1995), or reconstructing them as literally fatal. For example, *Gladiators* becomes deadly in *The Running Man*, (Paul Michael Glaser, 1987), while *Stay Tuned* (Peter Hyams, 1992) creates a game show called *You Bet Your Life!*, where contestants must do just that.

7 The issue of the degree to which drunkenness can be considered a resistant political practice, and thus an element of Aboriginal identity, is taken up by, Gillian Cowlishaw (1988c), Marcia Langton (1988), among others.

8 As in, for example, the case of Yothu Yindi: 'some critics argue that because their image is less threatening than that of, say, Bart

Willoughby and Mixed Relations, it is therefore more assimilatory'
(Turner, 1994:  133).

# Part B: Introduction

# Genres and oeuvres working to limit intertextuality

The second section of this thesis deals with a variety of publicly circulated discourses, linked by the ways in which they work to limit interpretation by providing sets of validated intertexts. Through prior knowledge of these bodies of work, viewers come to films and television programs with certain expectations and knowledges relevant to the work of interpretation. In the examples addressed in this part of the thesis, bodies of films and television texts contained in a genre are seen to provide conceptual schemata (Bordwell, 1989: 249), whose function, as with Jauss's 'horizons', is to provide expectations and interpretive guides. Similarly, the oeuvre of a perceived author is understood to provide a set of validated intertexts, constructed as immediately relevant in the work of closing down interpretive possibilities of a text.

> [G]enres help render films...intelligible and...explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen (Neale, 1990: 46)

A genre is a group of films; genre names are labels which may be applied to members of the group. However, beyond such common-sensical propositions, the concept of genre in film theory has in fact proved to be a variegated one, serving several quite distinct functions. Genre has stood as a synonym for the products of mass culture, against an antonymic 'art' (Schatz, 1981: 6; Grant, 1986: xi; Sobchack, 1986: 86, 102-105). Genre films have been claimed as the explicit bearer of inescapable ideology; again, interestingly, in opposition to an art which is either ideology-free, or ideologically correct (Wright, 1986: 41; Bourget, 1986). They have also been

interpreted as symptomatic of wider cultural moods and concerns (Kitses, 1969; Schatz, 1981; Grant, 1986; Noriega, 1987).

Such understandings of the concept are rendered unappealing by the logical flaws, generalisations, and concomitant factual errors which often appear in such writing[1].  Most difficult with such conceptions of 'genre' is the idealism which underlies much of the writing: genres are presented not so much as material groups of films, as extra- or even pre-textual ideals which precede these films[2].

In order to overcome the logical difficulties with such an idealist concept of genre, it has proved necessary for critical writing to turn to more dynamic and contingent understandings of genre as *process* (Rusch, 1987; Cohen, 1986: 206, 207).  Barbara Klinger outlines this new conception of genre as:

> ...a classical textual system which is produced from a volatile combination of disequilibrium (excess, difference) and equilibrium (containment, repetition)...[it is] an exigent permutation of this system which thrives on a play of variety and regulation...[T]he dynamics of difference/innovation... [are] system descriptive rather than system subversive. (Klinger, 1986: 88, 89)

Genre is no longer: 'something that pre-exists texts, but something that texts continually and constantly reconstitute' (Threadgold, 1989: 115). Such a move involves understanding genres not simply as bodies of films, but as processes which also involve readers:

> Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also and equally of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process...(Neale, 1990: 45, 46; see also Hauptmeier, 1987: 422)

Such a stance has a range of implications for consideration of genre in film.  It is no longer necessary to argue about the final assignation of films to a particular genre, for example, as it is more important to address the implications for understanding a film of reading it as an example of a

given genre. Most importantly for this thesis, it becomes sensible to talk
about genres as:

> ...institutions or social contracts...whose function is to specify the proper use
> of a particular cultural artefact...[texts] must be continually re-placed by
> conventions if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting
> multiplicity of uses...[genre] is the exclusion of undesirable responses
> (Jameson, 1981: 106-107).

Such a position is now familiar enough to be regarded as a critical norm.
Genres provide 'systematised familiarity' (White, 1985: 41); necessary
'constraints' (Kent, 1985: 134) on the act of interpretation. Similar
positions, though with varying terminologies, are expressed by Ralph
Cohen (1986: 210); Jane Feuer (1987: 119); Tony Bennett and Janet
Woollacott (1987: 81); Steve Neale (1980: 19); and Brian Moon (1992: 58-59).
The work of cognitive psychology offers an interesting approach to the
issue, one which relates genres to those cognitive schemata which enable
acts of interpretation (Olson, Mark et al, 1981; Hauptmeier, 1987: 398;
Rusch, 1987: 446; Schmidt, 1987: 374).

The implications of such a theoretical position can be illustrated with
examples which are, ironically, given as common sense by earlier writers
on genre. Both Barry Grant (1986b) and Edward Buscombe (1986) refer to
the sequence which occurs at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).
The latter points out that:

> ...when Vera Miles goes down into the cellar, we are terrified, not just because
> we have heard Norman say he is taking his mother down there...our certainty
> that something unpleasant can be found comes from our knowledge that
> nasty things come out of cellars in this kind of film. (Buscombe, 1986: 20)

Grant adds that 'Such a response is deepened by our past experience
of...horror films' (Grant, 1986b: 118). Certainly, it seems undeniable that a
generic awareness of other horror films will be mobilised by many
members of an audience to work with and beyond the immediately
present text. This work will contribute to the production of
interpretations of what is happening on the screen; and to expectations of
what will happen next. This is precisely the way in which genres, in

Neale's sense of knowledges and systems of expectations, can be understood as limits, placing 'horizons of expectation' on the text.

Publicly circulated discourses of authorship can be understood as working in a similar way, to close down meaning through the construction of oeuvres. These once again provide conceptual schemata, systems of expectations as to how interpretations of a given text should be made. The similarity of genre and authorship as systems of meaning are such that Andrew Tudor describes them as: 'twins...both ways of organising films into groups for purposes of further and hopefully rewarding analysis' (Tudor, 1970: 33).

In a common sense formulation, the author (or *auteur*) of a film (the term is less obviously applicable to television texts) is a named individual (usually the director), whose label can be invoked to justify and guarantee interpretations of that film. This is often done with reference to other works in that director's oeuvre. Emerging initially as a 'politics' of authorship ('*la politique des auteurs*') in the French journal *Cahiers du Cinema*[3], the idea of anchoring meaning in a film by means of a validated author can be read as initially an 'oppositional stance' in the face of a simplistic and homogenous body of institutional film criticism (Willemen in Neale, 1980: 2). 'Author politics' was initially involved in a necessary process of asserting the value of despised cultural forms (Hollywood) by claiming for them the author status so valued in more traditional art forms. In its earliest form, the politics of authorship (as popularised by Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen) relies on the idea of meaning being made through an interpretive schema taken from a group of films linked by the name of an author. Referring to the work of John Ford, for example, Edward Buscombe suggests that:

> ...films such as *Donovan's Reef, Wings of Eagles* and especially *The Sun Shines Bright* (almost indecipherable to those unacquainted with Ford's work) do reveal a great deal of meaning when seen in the context of Ford's work as a whole... (Buscombe, 1981: 29)

In this earliest version of a politics of authorship, though, there is little acknowledgement that the work is interpretive, or the interpretive

schemata offered by authorial names are arbitrary ones. Rather, it appears that this author (almost always the director) is *the* centre of interpretation, originator of *all* meaning, and the guarantee of the artistic status of a work.

The 'auteur-structuralism' identified by Caughie as the next stage of authorial arguments (Caughie, 1981: v-vi) moves beyond romantic arguments of the individual author, but retains the name of the author as an individuating label, again applied to the works forming an oeuvre. Once again, interpretation is carried out across a body of validated intertexts, conceptual schemata emerging and evolving as each is addressed. And once again, there is a reductive tendency to insist that the interpretation made, no longer guaranteed by the individual creative genius but now (with a nod to the anthropological work of Levi-Strauss) by deep structures of society (Caughie, 1981: 127), is the correct, deep, one-true meaning.

In a later move, one which is most useful for this work, the author-figure who structures texts is rewritten as an avowedly fictional character. Once again, his [sic] function is to stabilise meaning by providing an oeuvre of texts whose use can provide conceptual schemata; but the position of this named figure is understood as arbitrary and contingent. This is the 'author function', a fiction read from a set of works in order to assign meaning to individual texts (Foucault, 1986: 107-108). No longer the single, unassailable guarantor of meaning, but an arbitrary schemata:

> ...it does not develop spontaneously...It is, rather, the result of a complex
> operation which constructs a certain rational being that we call 'author'.
> (Foucault, 1988: 110)

It is this last understanding of the author, the author who exists after his [sic] own 'death' (Barthes, 1981) as a 'fiction' nonetheless potent in producing meaning, which is taken up in this work. Addending the name of an author to a text suggests ways in which that text should be read. In suggesting an oeuvre, a body of intertexts sanctioned as immediately relevant, the work of producing an applicable schema is facilitated. The name of an author sets limits on the meanings which can be made of text. It is the work of these 'twins' — genre and author — as discourses which

validate intertexts, and thus sets horizons on the work of interpretation, which will be addressed in this part of the thesis.

With the death of the author as a creative genius and romantic individual, it is no longer possible to guarantee a single proper meaning of a text.  Similarly, when arguments about genre refuse any longer to worry about assigning a text to its correct genre, it is possible to read texts in a multitude of ways.  Entirely new 'genres' can be created by critics, allowing for sophisticated readings of films in relation to texts which might at first appear to have no relevance to them; or new authors might be found whose presence guarantees meaning in previously unconsidered films.

This is not the interest of this work.  In kind with Bordwell's historical poetics, the concern is once again with those publicly circulated labels which have been available to audiences as they make sense of films and of television programs.  Steve Neale has suggested that those genre labels suggested by 'the film industry and its ancillary institutions' are of 'central importance' in understanding the meanings made of films (Neale, 1990: 52;  see also Feuer, 1987: 120; Rusch, 1987: 433, 466).  These limiting schemata are understood to be socially circulated structures, which are emphatically available for sense-making practices in relation to media texts.

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1   In the case of Judith Wright, for example, who believes that 'genre' films are distinct from 'non-genre' films, and that all of the former are inescapably reactionary, she finds it necessary to state that the 'characteristics' of all 'genre' films include the fact that they 'never deal directly with present social and political problems' (Wright, 1986:  41); 'all of them are set in the non-present' (42); and in particular, 'horror films take place in the past' (42).  In answer to the first point, genres such as the thriller often deal with political corruption and contemporary social problems; comedies are generally set in the present; and a quick survey of a book such as Andrew Tudor's *Monsters and Mad Scientists* (1989) makes clear that not only have the overwhelming majority of recent horror

films been set in the present, they have often explicitly dealt with modern social issues.  Such factual inaccuracies are common in writing that generalises about the genre films (see also Sobchack, 1986).

2  'The genre film is a structure that embodies the idea of form and the strict adherence to form that is opposed to experimentation, novelty, or tampering with the order of things' (Sobchack, 1986: 112).

3  The more familiar term 'auteur theory' is introduced by Andrew Sarris in a *Film Culture* article (Buscombe, 1981: 22).

# Chapter B.1: Horror

## B.1.1

> Tim Rowse has questioned the purely cinematic considerations... developed around *The Last Wave*. He points out that the film had historical and political pertinence at the time of its first appearance in 1977...*The Last Wave* strives to ground urban blacks in a doubly subterranean history at a time when the Aboriginality of urban blacks was (and is) an issue... (Maynard, 1989: 221)

> Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (one of the few great horror films of the decade...) is the story of an Australian [sic] lawyer (Richard Chamberlain) who defends a group of aborigines [sic] involved in ritual murder, one of whom begins to appear in his dreams. These dreams put him in touch with a parallel world ('the other side') which recalls the prophetic dreams of his childhood. Eventually David discovers that he is a member of a race of priests, and that the aborigines are expecting a great wave to destroy the intruding white civilisation... (Kawin, 1984: 11)

This chapter examines those representations of Aboriginality which have occurred in Australian texts generically identifiable as horror films. Briefly examining theoretical writing to identify some elements of a conceptual schema which emerges from familiarity with this genre (such as, for example, nasty things happen in cellars), it then suggests the ways in which this set of interpretive limits might interact with wider discourses to produce particular understandings of Aboriginality from these films. Tim Rowse produces a reading of *The Last Wave* in terms of contemporary land rights legislation. In doing so, he necessarily invokes a set of interpretive schemata — in this case wider social discourses of Aboriginal identity. This makes good sense for understanding the interpretations made of the film, and the wider discursive uses of the film, by viewers knowledgeable about land rights. For some other audiences, however — those audiences whose knowledges of film might be strongly generic — other interpretations may be more obvious. In Bruce

Kawin's reading, for example, land rights are irrelevant, even descent is not an issue, but Chamberlain is a 'priest' (stock figure in the horror film) and the wave is magically associated with 'aboriginal' retribution. The reading conditions which make such differing interpretations of a horror film possible are the concern of this chapter.

## B.1.2

Much work on the horror film, beyond that which denies generic status in order to search for works of individuated art (Prawer, 1980: 6; Dickstein, 1984: 68) has been psychoanalytic in nature. This writing, relying as it does on inescapable psychic, rather than learned, modes of interpretation, is not directly relevant to this work[1]. Similarly, work which claims to isolate the 'ideological function of horror' (Grant, 1986; see also, Wood, 1984; Polan, 1984) is not of immediate interest to a thesis which is avowedly little interested in such grandiose conceptual schemata, and even less in 'symptomatic' readings which have unconscious 'effects' on viewers.

Nevertheless, from the large and ever-growing body of critical work on horror films, as well as from the texts subsumed under the generic label, it is possible to abstract a series of characteristics which might be involved in the process of making meaning from a given film. These are: the understanding of the supernatural in terms of white, Western histories; the monstrousness of crossing boundaries, particularly that between man and nature; the centrality of dreams and dreaming, and their mystical significance; the danger associated with the Terrible Place; the palpable presence of spirits; and the spiritual potency of objects.

These characteristics are not essences of the genre, they do not guarantee the status of a film as not/horror. Rather, they are a series of characteristics which writers on the horror film have foregrounded as important; and which personal experience suggests are obvious to a generically-literate consumer as relevant to the work of interpreting horror films. Their contingent nature renders them no less meaningful in such a context.

**B.1.3**

The intersection of horror and race has not been a highly visible one. This is true not only in terms of critical work (pieces by Kobena Mercer [1986] and Richard Dyer [1988] are rare exceptions in a critical vacuum), but also of films themselves. In an international perspective, blackness has in fact proven to have surprisingly little do with horror. There may be several reasons for this. In the more general horror film tradition, national difference has proven to be a sufficiently threatening difference — *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) both locate themselves in a primitive Eastern Europe, for example. There may also be a feeling that race is too serious an issue to be addressed in horror films. While this might seem unlikely, bearing in mind horror's necessary challenge to taboos and tastelessness, it must be acknowledged that where race does figure in horror films, if the effect is not softened by comedy (*Blacula* — William Crane, 1972), the film may well provoke controversy (witness the case of *Candyman* [Rose, 1992] in the US).

Nevertheless, the history of Australian filmic representation of Aboriginality does contain a number of texts which can be generically aligned with 'horror'. *The Last Wave* (Weir, 1977), is the first and one of the more contentious films. Indeed, it stands as a good example of the processual nature of generic formation. The film tells of the adventures of an American lawyer (Richard Chamberlain), who suffers from a series of bizarre, weather-related dreams. He eventually discovers he has Aboriginal heritage, and these dreams are related to the Aboriginal dreamtime, prophesying the destruction of the world by a giant wave.

The film is the focus of a lively series of claims by generic prospectors. To 'Movieland' video stores, for example, it comes under the category 'Australian'. To writers such as David Stratton, in his series of studies of Australian directors, the film is explicitly understood as a 'Peter Weir' film, and can only be understood in relation to Weir's other films; so it has: 'the kind of climate of wrongness, mystery and menace...which Weir has been developing ever since *Homesdale'* (PP McGuinness in the *National Times*: quoted in Stratton, 1980: 78). Yet another possible generic affiliation is offered by David Halliwell in his *Film Guide*; in which the film is described as a 'Curious supernatural drama successfully played as a mystery' (Halliwell,

1992: 640).  Each of these generic identities is supported by textual aspects of the film:  it is recognisably an 'art' (that is, 'Weir') movie (disjointed narrative and focus on characters, excessive concern with shot construction, and so on). The 'Australian' genre has to some degree overlapped with such considerations (as a genre, it is auteur-led, and to assign the film a status as a 'Weir' film is also, at this point in his career, to assign it a place as an 'Australian' film); and the film also undoubtedly carries signifiers of Australianness (principally, Aboriginality itself; also recognisable landscapes and city-scapes; accents of minor characters; and so on).  The narrative can also be understood as a mystery — indeed, it is predicated on the question of what is going on.

In short, *The Last Wave* neatly illustrates the reductive nature of attempts to fit a film into a given generic category.  It can certainly be read in all of the above ways, invoking for each perceived generic affiliation a different conceptual schema; which will, in turn, close down the meaning of the text, and of the Aboriginality in the text, in different ways.  And as well as the affiliations listed above, *The Last Wave* can certainly be read as a horror film (Derry, 1987: 171; Prawer, 1987: 17; Kawin, 1987: 103); once again, the affiliation has particular implications for the interpretations which will be made of the film.

*Initiation* (Pearce, 1987), the second film to be considered, is similarly generically uncertain.  As a rites of passage movie, it tells of an American boy who comes to Australia to be with his father.  He forms a relationship with an Aboriginal mentor, and then goes through a traumatic experience of being involved in an aeroplane crash, surviving in the wild, being lost in caves, and finally returning to civilisation.  This is linked to Aboriginal rites of initiation to manhood.

Textually, the film is not immediately legible as a horror.  However, it is industrially circulated as such: 'Movieland' places the video in the horror section, and the video cover describes it in such terms.  In this context, there are enough textual signifiers of the horror genre in the film itself to enable, if not entirely to promote, such a reading.

There is no such need to explain or justify *The Howling part III: The Marsupials* (Mora, 1987), a film dealing with a distinctly Australian breed of werewolves

(not surprisingly, they carry their young in pouches). The hero falls in love with one of the werewolves, they have a marsupial werewolf baby, the hero becomes a werewolf and (after a plea for tolerance from an intolerant society), they all live happily ever after. The film features Aboriginal werewolves, and, more interestingly, white werewolves who are signified as Aboriginal.

The last three films under consideration were released in 1988. *The Dreaming* (Andreacchio, 1988) tells of a vengeful Aboriginal spirit released when an archaeologist trespasses on an Aboriginal burial site. His daughter is possessed by the spirit, the father is possessed by the spirit of the whaler who killed the girl who is buried on the site, and they fight to the death.

*Kadaicha* (Bogle, 1988) features (again) a vengeful Aboriginal spirit, this time released when a property developer trespasses on an Aboriginal burial site. Local teenagers are killed by the spirit, before it possesses the developer's daughter's boyfriend. A local Aborigine exorcises the spirit.

*Zombie Brigade* (Musca and Pattison, 1988) is a complex (confused?) film about a troop of Vietnam vampires, released when a monument is defiled. The town is saved when a local Aborigine raises the dead of World War I as zombies to fight the vampires. Unfortunately, the vampires and zombies then decide to join forces in a pact against the living.

These films are all avowedly 'horror' films in some publicly circulated discourses. Other films also partake of an iconography of horror. *Frog Dreaming* (Trenchard-Smith, 1985), for example, and *The Naked Country* both feature sequences in which backlit Aboriginal figures are seen through eerily-lit smoke, to accompaniment of disturbing music. Such moments may partake of the implications of horror for Aboriginality that will be discussed below.

These horror films represent Aboriginality in a genre which has not proven particularly visible in Australia[2]. The scarcity of Australian horror films, though[3], need not suggest that Australian audiences are illiterate in this genre.

It is interesting to note that five of these films were released in the period 1987/1988, around the year of Australia's putative Bicentennial. Without

turning to the symptomatic readings of culture-through-horror films which have proved to be the most popular critical approach to the genre since Robin Wood described this genre as 'the return of the repressed' (Wood, 1978: 32) — an approach which has lead to grand pronouncements on the unconscious and dreams of entire cultures[4] — it is possible to acknowledge the significance of this date. Noel Carroll suggests that:

> [I]n certain historical circumstances...the horror genre is capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into its iconography of fear and distress... (Carroll, 1990: 208; see also Waller, 1987: 12).

Such a process need not be understood as an unconscious one; it can equally as well be interpreted as a materially-driven act of capitalistic differentiation. Aboriginal people had an impressive visibility during this period of Australia's Bicentennial celebrations. Aboriginal involvement in the marking of Invasion Day, for example, ensured that more Aboriginal images were in public circulation at this time than had previously been the case (Meadows and Oldham, 1991). To a still-fruitful 10BA-led low-budget film industry, Aboriginality could well seem to offer at this time a visible and potent gimmick for differentiation. In order to discuss this sudden burst of Aboriginal horror, it is not necessary to turn to a Jungian collective unconscious: an understanding of industrial considerations, and the public circulation of discourses, is equally valid.

## B.1.4

In making sense of the Aboriginal presence in these films, it would certainly be possible to search for Muecke's 'available discourses' on Aborigines (Muecke, 1982); or to apply, as Catriona Moore has done, wider knowledges of government policies towards Aboriginal populations (Moore, 1984). Both approaches would produce interesting and valid readings. This chapter, aiming towards a historical poetics, concerns itself with a more visible and more widely distributed intertextual schema: interpreting the films in the context of other horror films.

The first axis along which such a conceptual schema might limit readings of Aboriginality is in terms of the white and Western understandings of the supernatural which consistently structure horror films. The genre of the horror film is a Western tradition — and indeed, predominantly an American one[5]. Indeed, Robin Wood believes that horror is 'the most important of all American genres' (1978: 129). It is unsurprising then that the films insistently articulate the supernatural in terms of Western histories of the unknown.

In all of these films, Aboriginality is explicitly linked to the supernatural. *Kadaicha* and *The Dreaming*, feature Aboriginal spirits. In *Zombie Brigade*, it is an Aborigine who can raise Aboriginal spirits and white zombies. *The Last Wave* involves Aborigines who are telepathic and have precognitions. The Aboriginal man in *Initiation* similarly has precognitions, and can make them visible in a magic crystal. In *The Howling III*, Burnum Burnum can turn into a werewolf at will. Indeed, all of these films work to suggest that the supernatural is the space of Aboriginality. *Zombie Brigade* , for example, explicitly attempts to disavow any relationship between white culture and the supernatural sphere. Not only is it the Aboriginal and Asian characters who are linked to the supernatural by accepting it and fighting it on its own terms, but white townspeople loudly deny any connection with it, crying out: 'I've been fighting these primitive religious fantasies all my life'.

Despite this insistence that the supernatural is the space of the Other, of the Aboriginal, the horror genre has in fact worked within quite familiar, Western depictions of the supernatural. The 'Aboriginal' supernatural sphere of *Zombie Brigade* is in fact a space of vampires and zombies. While the (white) mayor may dismiss it as 'That blackfella stuff', there is no blackfella tradition of zombies and vampires. Zombies, despite the Haitian and Caribbean roots which are visible in earlier films (*White Zombie*, Halperin, 1932; *I Walked with a Zombie*, Tourneur, 1943), have in recent horror cinema been reconstructed as a Western (again, largely an American) phenomenon[6]. Similarly, in *The Dreaming*, although the spirit is named Aboriginal, and is associated with Aboriginal cultural artefacts, it kills characters in manners mostly reminiscent of American films like *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) — impaled by a falling load from a passing lorry, and so on. The video cover of the film *Kadaicha* describes the kadaicha stone, which portends the death of each teeny-bopper character, as 'hellish' and 'unholy' — terms related to a Western

(Christian) spiritual tradition. When the story of the film suggests that only teenagers are dying because the graves being defiled are those of Aboriginal teenagers killed by settlers, one of the heroes goes on to describe the behaviour of the Aboriginal spirit as 'An eye for an eye' — a Christian interpretation of the supernatural situation. *Initiation* presents an Aboriginal man who is described by a woman on the farm the hero visits as 'an Aboriginal witch doctor'. This witch doctor has a magic crystal (which has uses to see the future) — suggesting the New Age crystal philosophy which Marcus describes. Here, the connection of Aboriginality and New Age mysticism is again played out — Aborigines are New Age, spiritual, mystic, wise, and use crystals supplied by New Age shops. The dreaming-spirit of Burnum Burnum in *The Howling III* physically alters the man into a wolf; in a way that is narratively and visually identical to the werewolves of the two preceding *Howling* films.

In all of these films, then, Aboriginality is relentlessly understood within Western supernatural traditions; it is part of Marcus' 'generalised, Western-based shamanism' (Marcus, 1988: 268). It is true that in the arena of horror films, this seems to be an unspectacular observation. These films feature an 'Aboriginal' supernatural which is constructed in terms of zombies, vampires, werewolves, the Devil and explicitly Christian references; and this is what happens in horror films[7]. Generic verisimilitude renders these narratives unsurprising, even sensible (sense can be made of them). Without a knowledge of those films which have gone before, the viewer would have more space to ask, How do these Western monsters fit into Aboriginal religion? In such a generic space, the question is, if not impossible, at least irrelevant.

As mentioned in Chapter A.2, Julie Marcus describes the co-option by American crystal mystics of 'Ayers Rock' as an: 'attempt to incorporate the rock into [white] cosmologies' (Marcus, 1988: 268). Such a move to render Aboriginal spirituality comprehensible by articulating it within well-known Western narratives of what is unknown, is very similar to the work of horror films. This supernatural, indeed, the very idea of the 'supernatural' in this way, is a Western construct. In Aboriginal culture, there is no werewolf, as such, and werewolves are not affected by silver bullets; vampires are not defeated by crucifixes, and so on. When Aboriginality is placed in these

generic terms of reference, understandings of Aboriginality in terms of a white supernatural are promoted.

## B.1.5

Another aspect of horror films which will be available to audiences using generic schemata in order to limit meaning in these films, is the place of nature, and the danger of not patrolling the boundaries between man and animal. Many writers on the horror film have noticed that the crossing of cultural boundaries is a point at which horror occurs (Noel Carroll, 1990: 44; Steve Neale, 1980: 21). Boundaries such as alive/dead (zombies), human/machine (cyborgs) and, particularly, human/animal (werewolves; *The Reptile* [John Gilling, 1966]; *The Fly* [David Cronenberg, 1986]) signal monstrosity. In the genre of the horror film, the crossing of the boundary into the animal is associated with unbounded and sensual desires, a loss of human consciousness and control. As a visible 'reality', it is also a metaphorical quantity.

This metamorphosis into an animal form is associated with Aboriginality in these films. The most interesting, even if least explicit, examples occur in *The Howling part III*. Here, the (white) hero is an acknowledged expert on 'the unexplained' — including the mystery of the Turin shroud ('Well, the evidence is inconclusive'), werewolves — and Aboriginality (note again, the link between Aboriginality, and other elements of the 'supernatural'). On the simplest level, there are at least two Aboriginal men in this film who turn into werewolves. The film opens with 'old documentary' footage 'from 1905', of an Aboriginal tribe standing around a werewolf, tied to a post (while a lecturer's voice drones: 'the mask is so realistic — we don't know how they created it...'). The link of Aboriginality to the monstrous half-human werewolf is also established in rock art of werewolves; and in stories about the origin of the werewolves, which are told in terms that are reminiscent of dreamtime stories (speaking of the Phantom, the first werewolf — Jeboah, the werewolf heroine — says that: 'When he died, he turned into a big wolf — now he visits us in our dreams'. Kendy [Burnum Burnum], the Aboriginal werewolf says that: 'When the hunters killed him, his spirit came into us').

Surprisingly, then, in *The Howling III*, most of the werewolves are in fact
played by white actors. Despite such an inconvenient fact, the film still works
to insist on Aboriginality being the source of this disturbing attack on
human/nature boundaries. The white werewolves/humans are portrayed as
feral: they live a camp lifestyle, and are often shown sitting outside their
shanty huts, around an open fire. A didgeridoo plays over their scenes; they
chant (although it sounds more like *Jesus Christ Superstar* than anything which
is recognisably coded as Aboriginal); they have clap sticks; they sing two
lovers together; and they paint their bodies. In all of this, the feral whites are
signified as Aboriginal; and werewolfism and Aboriginality continue to be
linked, even if the werewolves are not played (in the main) by Aboriginal
actors.

The horror film works as a generically privileged place for a monstrous
Aboriginality which crosses boundaries. Andrew Lattas makes clear that
such a construction of indigenous Australians has been widely circulated in
journalistic discourses. The 'heterogeneity of human and animal features'
which Steve Neale suggests is typical of horror films (Neale 1980: 21), is also
part of Australia's history of the Aboriginal. Lattas quotes Cunningham
(from 1852), in his belief that Aborigines are 'the connecting link between man
and the monkey tribe' (quoted in Lattas, 1987: 44); he also finds a general
belief in Aboriginality as 'the problematic point where humanity began to
differentiate itself from nature' (Lattas, 1987: 51).

Lattas goes on to argue that racist discourses of Aboriginality constructed its
monstrousness in precisely its impurity, its crossing over of boundaries: as in,
for example, contemporary reports of Aborigines eating raw animals, 'bones,
entrails and all' (quoted, Lattas, 1987: 44); crossing boundaries of the raw and
the cooked, the in/edible, inside and outside.

Aborigines are placed as in/human in their alignment with nature, an
affiliation which is visible in other horror films. In *Kadaicha*, the Aboriginal
spirit kills via nature. As the police sergeant says: 'a dog savage enough to
kill a girl, a spider with the fastest acting venom in history, and now a giant
eel that thinks its a boa constrictor — what the hell is going on?'. In *The Last
Wave*, Aboriginality is linked to deadly hailstones, and black, polluted rain.
In that film, when the hero (Richard Chamberlain) calls out the name of an

Aboriginal character — 'Charlie!' — the next shot is a close up of an owl. In a horror film, this montage carries a certain charge (with regard to spirits and possession) that is not generically true of, for example, the overlaying of women's faces over pictures of animals in the title sequence of *The Women* (Cukor, 1939).

The generic expectations of the horror film that monstrousness can be expressed in a movement across the boundaries of the human/nature divide enables unproblematic readings to be made of related discourses of Aboriginality. Roger Dadoun's comment that horror films illustrate the fact that: 'primitive religions...maintain magic and mystical relations with the animal world' (1989: 58) applies perfectly to *The Last Wave*. This monstrous crossing of civilised/primitive boundaries is unsurprising in horror films, and widely affiliated with Australia's Aboriginality.

## B.1.6

Dreams and dreaming have been highly visible in both horror films, and critical writing about horror films. In the body of texts themselves, dreams are eponymously well-recognised. A quick scan of *Hoffman's Guide to SF, Horror and Fantasy Movies* reveals nineteen films with 'Dream' or 'Nightmare' in the title[8]. It is similarly easy to produce a list of horror films whose subject matter includes dreams. The most obvious example is the series of *Nightmares on Elm Street:*, other high profile examples are *Vampyr* (Dreyer, 1932), *An American Werewolf in London* (Landis, 1981), *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1982), *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986), *The Fly* (Cronenberg, 1986), and *Phantasm* (Coscarelli, 1986).

Much critical work has tangentially addressed this textual presence of dreams and nightmares: none has questioned the part these play in narratives. Writing on horror films prefers to invoke nightmares as a cute metaphor for the psychological work of attending the cinema[9]. This has little relevance to the meanings audiences make of the dreams-within-dreams presented in the text of horror films. It is typical, though, that dreams are seen in films to be privileged access points to the spiritual world outside of an individual. In

these films, dreams present a truth which may not be perceived by a protagonist.

In relation to Aboriginality, this element of horror films takes on a particular dimension. For in Aboriginal English, the term 'Dreaming' has particular, and very important connotations. In fact, these horror films do typically invoke in some way these understandings of Dreaming as an important part of many Aboriginal cultures' worldviews. It is a common assertion in representations of Aboriginality that Aborigines enter their 'law' through the process of dreaming. Horror films, as a genre in which dreams are particularly visible, and in which it is unproblematic for a character's dream to be presented, render this idea literal. Certainly, the films currently under consideration take advantage of this generic possibility. In all of them, Aboriginality is consistently placed in the world of dreams. In *Kadaicha*, Aborigines appear in the (white) heroine's dream, fading in and out of reality with no material substance. Dressed in 'traditional' costume, wearing body paint, they move in slow motion, dancing around a fire. In *The Last Wave*, the (white) hero dreams, while a didgeridoo plays in the background, and he sees Aborigines in silhouette. He dreams not only of Aborigines, but prophecies of drowning and destruction. Again, an Aborigine (Gulpilil) literally fades away, lacking material presence. In *The Dreaming*, there are two sets of Aborigines. In the present, smart, streetwise, active and loud Aboriginal activists break into a museum and claim back artefacts. They die horribly, in a range of violent ways. By contrast, in the dreams of the (white) heroine, another Aborigine (Kristina Nehm) continually reappears, running in slow motion, screaming soundlessly, a helpless victim of the past. *Initiation* features a (white) hero, Danny; while undergoing the Aboriginal-style initiation which is the focus of the film, he has a series of dream-hallucinations, where he sees himself as a warrior, hears the disembodied voice of his Aboriginal mentor. Kailu then appears to him — again, as a non-corporeal entity who can fade in and out of existence. Finally, in *The Howling*, the situation is somewhat different. The hero dreams that he sees his (werewolf) girlfriend giving birth to a monster, before he wakes up with a shock. Although, in a way, this is once again a relegation of Aboriginality to dream (see above for an explanation of the ways in which the white werewolf tribe are signified as Aboriginal), the use of dream here is different. In all of

the above example, smoke, slow motion and a more ethereal atmosphere place Aboriginality in a recognisable dream(y) ethos. Here, the dream sequence is used differently, to provide a short, sharp shock effect of horror/waking up, that is familiar from other regions of the horror genre (*The Fly* [Cronenberg, 1986] and *Aliens* [Cameron, 1986]).

Dreams in horror films are transcendent, mystical places where hidden truths are revealed. In Australian horror films, Aborigines are firmly placed in the world of dreams. This seems to make sense, not only generically, but in wider constructions of the Aboriginal 'Dreaming'. But this latter set of discourses, of Aboriginal law and the 'Dreamtime' in which it functions, are not innocent transcriptions of indigenous cultures. Such an understanding of Aboriginal culture relies upon a semantic slippage, a metaphoric use of language which has been naïvely taken up with a dangerous literalism.

The term 'the Dreaming', or 'Dreamtime', in Western anthropology, is:

> a widely accepted shorthand to refer to the whole of the traditional
> Aboriginal culture that has been threatened by a variety of attacks from non-
> Aboriginal agents of cultural policy (Hodge and Mishra, 1991: 28).

The term, although now current in Aboriginal English, is in fact:

> ...a product of the grammar of English, a grammar deformed by certain
> English speakers for their own purposes...combining a definite article with a
> gerund, with no agent presumed to be doing the dreaming, and no object that
> is being dreamt...So although it now seems to be part of Aboriginal English,
> in fact it represents the insertion there of a fragment of a subdialect of
> standard English, anthropologese (28).

Having gestured towards the etymology of this term, it is even more important to emphasise that the word brings with it implications which are extremely unfair. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra note that: 'the many words in different languages that are now automatically translated as "the Dreaming" normally have no semantic connection to "dreams" or "dreaming"' (Hodge and Mishra, 1991: 28). As one Aboriginal interviewee of the ABC program *Being Aboriginal* comments:

> I think that the word dreaming in English is sleeping — you know, sleeping
> what you dream about. But for us it's got nothing to do with that
> whatsoever. Dreaming is the tracks you are responsible for. (Bowden and
> Bunbury, 1990: 33).

In horror films, dreams are the place in which repressed qualities re-emerge
with ferocious vitality. Robin Wood's 'return of the repressed' might better be
applied to the dreams presented textually within these narratives than to the
genre as a whole. Dreams, in a post-Freudian society, have traditionally been
the place where all that cannot be acknowledged in a conscious social being
are supposed to be contained — all those qualities and forces which have
been named the Other. This is a fair enough description of dreams in horror
films. Ascribing Aborigines such a position, in this genre, and in language
more generally, maintains a process of othering. It also disempowers
Aboriginal people. If Aboriginality exists mystically in dreams, rather than
against recognisable modern backgrounds, this renders materialist critiques
of historical atrocities or current depravations suffered by Aboriginal
individuals somehow irrelevant. As Hodge explains, if Aboriginal experience
takes place in a dreamtime, this allows no space for: 'history and change, or
progress...Dreamtime...[is] a universe of meaning constructed purely
according to Aboriginalist principles' (Hodge, 1990: 203).

The impact of this fact can be seen in the comments of writers on *The Last
Wave*. For example, the film is:

> an especially evocative horror film, taking as its subject the dreamworld of
> the Australian Aborigines and their conflict with Western society (Derry,
> 1987: 171).

This 'dreamworld' is, for another writer`: 'the Jungian territory of the land of
the dead...or the "dream time"'. (Bruce Kawin, 1986: 241). The place of dreams
in horror films, and the place of Aborigines in these dreams, moves to
collapse Aboriginal beliefs and culture into the unknown and uncivilised
unconscious which psychoanalysis perceives being played out in dreams.
The term '[D]reamworld', used by Derry, in fact carries a very different
charge to 'dreamtime' (the former holding implications of fantasy and of
daydreaming): but at the same time their semantic closeness underlines the

dangers of the latter term. The literalisation of the term 'dreamtime' in the dream-laden genre of horror films certainly aids a process of rendering Aboriginality unreal and non-material.

### B.1.7

Another point at which the horror genre intersects with presentations of Aboriginality is in the importance afforded place.

As Stephen Heath has suggested, one of the ways in which cinema makes its images legible is in the construction of meaningful place from an undifferentiated primordial space (Heath, 1981). This process can be understood as linked to cinema's construction of narrative and its proffering of subject positions:

> ...narrative involves a process of centring, in the orchestration of film space and in the spectator's relationship to it. Space becomes place through the continual inscription of the spectator in the diegetic world of the film...space becomes meaningful as place when certain relations of looking are enacted. (Balides, 1993: 25, 26).

In the horror film, the ascription of meaning to place is generically familiar. To refer back to Edward Buscombe's comments:

> ...when Vera Miles goes down into the cellar, we are terrified, not just because we have heard Norman say he is taking his mother down there...our certainty that something unpleasant will be found comes from our knowledge that nasty things come out of cellars in this kind of film. (Buscombe, 1986: 20)

In fact, as Will Rockett notes, there are certain places in the horror film which are 'specifically cursed or evil...the Bad Place' (Rockett, 1988: 105). This Bad Place is 'a venerable element of horror' (Clover, 1989: 102).

Various writers have offered theories as to why this should be. Andrew Britton's idea, taken up by Robin Wood, links this belief to capitalistic ideals. The Bad Place here is understood as The Bad House; the Bad House manifests

itself as an evil place in a manner that: 'stems from a long tradition in American (and Western Capitalist) culture...Traditionally it [property] represents an extension of...the personalities of the inhabitants...' (Wood, 1978: 31). Carol Clover presents rather a psychoanalytically informed reading of this horror staple. Rather than addressing Bad Houses, she believes that horror films favour dark, wet, underground Bad Places. The fear invoked by such places she then traces back beyond mere response to generic codes, to find the root rather in the essential fears of the Western (male?) subject. Via Freud, she argues that fear of these places is, like the fear of premature burial he detected in his patients, really about the fear of 'intra-uterine existence' (Freud, quoted in Clover, 1989: 93). The Terrible Place, as Clover describes it, has (in the examples she chooses — *Psycho* [Hitchcock, 1960]; *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [Hooper, 1974]; and *Hell Night* [De Simone, 1981]) just such an 'intrauterine' quality — 'dark and often damp', suggestive of the terrifying 'female genital organs' (Clover, 1989: 115).

Without wishing to take either of these suggestions too literally, allowing that there may be useful elements in each approach, it is true that the Bad Place, a place constructed (certainly, as Heath suggests, in a complex process of vision and point of view structures) as heavy with portentous meaning, is a recognisable part of horror films. It may be summarised as follows: there are certain places which are familiar as being dangerous and frightening.

Before moving onto the specific mechanics by which this idea is mobilised in horror films of Aboriginality, it is worth sketching a series of relevant discourses pertaining to Aboriginality. The issue of land rights has been perhaps the most common idea to which Aboriginality is linked in the representations of settler culture — certainly in newspapers, television news, and current affairs programmes. Annette Hamilton argues that the currently dominant image of Aboriginality in Australia is concerned more with the 'mystic link with the land' than with discourses of culture or genetics (Hamilton, 1990: 33).

In relation to Clover's work, without necessarily embracing her interpretations, it is noticeable that Aboriginality has consistently been associated exactly those terrible places she describes in her article. Aboriginality and caves have long been linked. Indeed, Hamilton notes that

the: 'revelation deep inside a cave covered with Aboriginal carvings and paintings', a narrative turn she traces back as far as *Jedda*, is an: 'instant cliché of Aboriginal mysticism and authenticity' (Hamilton, 1990: 33). A similar linkage of Aboriginality with caves can be seen in the insistence with which rock art is presented as representative of Aboriginal culture — in texts as diverse as *The Flying Doctors'* episode, 'A Doctor's Dreaming' (Crawfords, 1990); the action adventure film *The Naked Country* (West, 1985); the social realism film *Blackfellas* (Ricketson, 1993); the natural history program *Rolf's Walkabout* (ABC, 1971); and so on.

In horror films, this articulation of Aboriginality through the 'terrible place' of caves becomes insistent. In *The Dreaming*, the Aboriginal girl who appears in Cathy's dreams is often seen to be running in a cave. Indeed, at one point in the film, Cathy is overcome by a dream while in a hospital. She has a vision of the Aboriginal girl. However, in order to view ('traditional') Aboriginality, Cathy must first enter a suitable place. She vanishes from the modern, technological setting of the hospital, and is literally dragged back though a stone tunnel, to arrive at the cave where she has the vision of the Aboriginal girl. In *The Howling*, rock art in a cave tells of the Aboriginal origins of werewolfism. The climax of the film *Initiation* concerns the young hero Danny being lost in a system of caves, strange and threatening, where he sees visions of Aborigines (this is his Aboriginal-style initiation experience).

Even more telling are the settings of Aboriginality in *The Last Wave* and *Kadaicha*. Here, Aborigines are present in contemporary urban situations. There are no caves. But the films seem loath to present Aborigines in everyday geographical spaces, as though Aboriginality is somehow necessarily imbricated with darkness and the underground. Both of these narratives find it necessary to construct a modern equivalent of these caves. Both turn to sewers, presenting Aborigines as (not fully corporeal) figures that live in dark, dripping tunnels. The films manage not to sacrifice the idea of Aboriginality as associated with caves, despite moving to contemporary urban settings.

Because these are horror films — and the places linked with Aboriginality are obviously Terrible Places — Aboriginality is associated, in generic readings of these texts, with just such qualities. Indeed, Will Rockett notes a tendency in

recent horror films to present Bad Places whose danger is specifically related to a racial heritage. He points out that *The Amytiville Horror* (Rosenberg, 1979), *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) and *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) all, in some way, attribute the terrible events that occur to the fact of desecration of Indian burial grounds (Rockett, 1988: 105). Just such a move occurs in these Australian examples. Aboriginality is linked to sacred sites; these sites are Bad Places, spaces of monstrous and terrifying spectacle.

This narrative turn links Aboriginality to the land in quite a specific way. The politics of land rights has involved Aboriginal groups finding politically empowering ways of articulating their connection to the land (Barnes, 1988). By contrast, the Bad Place re-interprets spiritual links with place in essentialist terms. The danger of taking Aboriginal land, in this genre, is not that it is an act of cultural aggression; or that it might damage Aboriginal cultures; distress Aboriginal people; or result in focused Aboriginal political activity. Rather, land rights is important because otherwise, a bad Aboriginal spirit is going to come and get you.

This is literally the plot of two of these films. In *The Dreaming*, a vengeful Aboriginal spirit is released when an archaeologist opens an Aboriginal burial ground; in *Kadaicha*, a vengeful Aboriginal spirit is released when a developer defiles an Aboriginal burial ground. This association of Aboriginality with the terrible place, with land rights (more or less explicitly) then serves two functions. On the one hand, it reinforces implications of Aboriginality with the land, the most common (political) image of the Aboriginal. On the other hand, land rights is rendered generically legible in horror films by linking it to the supernatural. The effect this will have on an individual viewer's perception of the Land Right's cause will depend on their perception of spirituality.

It is at this point perhaps worth mentioning the distinction made by Noel Carroll. He devotes a chapter of his book asking what makes the experience of horror in the cinema — what he calls 'art horror' — a pleasurable experience, when the same experiences outside of the cinema would be unpleasant (Carroll, 1990: 15). His conclusion, unspectacular as it is, basically relies on the perception of the spectator that although this is involving, it is not real. In the same way, the spectator's interpretation of supernatural

explanations for land rights must be caught up in the same double think. In order to understand the film, the genre demands that this be read as sensible (verisimilitude). In order to function as a pleasurable horror film experience, it must be denied as real (non-realism/fantasy). The way in which any explanation offered by this explicitly dis/avowed text might play in everyday considerations of Aboriginal land rights remains unclear. What is more obvious is that the potent discourses of aggressive Aboriginal land rights claims, are written into, and read out of, horror films, in terms generically legible as the Terrible Place.

## B.1.8

Horror films present supernatural spirits as an element of generic verisimilitude. If a character suggests a non-corporeal spirit as a possible explanation of a narrative event in a horror film, audiences may well accord that explanation some degree of acceptance, at least in the film's own terms of reference (Neale, 1990b: 163). The presence of these spirits has interesting effects on readings made of the films, particularly in relation to recent debates around Aboriginality and essentialism.

Aboriginal spirits are present in the films *The Dreaming* and *Kadaicha*. They are active agents in the narrative. In the former film, the spirit kills an Aboriginal girl, twisting her head around. It possesses Cathy and transports her (in dreams and visions) back to the early days of Aboriginal/settler conflict. In the latter, the spirit places kadaicha crystals [sic] on the pillow of teenage schoolchildren, and mobilises elements of the local fauna to maul them to death. These spirits are generically unsurprising elements. What part do they play in constructions of Aboriginality?

The issue of whether those characteristics understood to be 'Aboriginal' are transmitted to individuals culturally or genetically proves still to be a contentious one. Andrew Lattas and Mudrooroo Nyoongah have both argued that the 'essentialism' of an Aboriginality transmitted by 'blood' is an important part of Aboriginal self-identity (Nyoongah, 1992; Lattas, 1992b). David Hollinsworth, by contrast, has noted the dangers of such discourses, finding in such self-identifications '[t]he parallel with American racist

ideology and segregation laws based on "one drop of blood"' (Hollinsworth, 1992: 142). Andrew Lattas, replying to this worry, is concerned that 'Essentialism should not be essentialised' (Lattas, 1992b: 162), and that arguments which prove dangerous in official and legal discourses may in fact be empowering in a more private context.

Despite these caveats, and as noted in Chapter A.1, it seems clear that essentialist arguments of genetic descent have been used in dominant discourses to justify some of the worst government treatment of Aborigines in Australia. Hollinsworth claims that genetic ideas of the Aboriginal are responsible for:

> ...[t]he infamous Protection legislation, compulsory assimilation, the
> suppression of social and cultural practices, and in particular, the break up of
> Aboriginal families and the removal of children...ideas of biological
> determinism are widely taken for granted as "commonsense"...[but t]he
> academic community has in general abandoned such mechanistic views of
> blood or genetics... (Hollinsworth, 1992: 141)

The question that is raised by these debates — essential or existential understandings of race? genetic or generic? — is perhaps the degree to which characteristics are inescapable and immaterial. Does 'Aboriginality' exist as a discrete essence before and beyond the presence of any Aboriginal people? Is its material manifestation only a reflection of an Aboriginal ideal that is carried, in the understanding of modern science, forever inscribed and inaccessible at the level of DNA? Or is it formed from and through the experiences of individual Aboriginal people, their social cohesions and disruptions, culture, communality and experiences. Is it static or dynamic?

Most films lend themselves to being interpreted under either doctrine. One example which calls attention to possibilities of reading not always acknowledged in work around Aboriginal representation, is *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978). This film addresses such issues directly, dealing as it does with the liminality of the individual who possesses both Aboriginal and European heritages. In the plot of the film, the liminal existence that Jimmie lives leads to increasing tension, hysteria and finally mass murder. But does his confusion and eventual madness result from a

mixture of bloods within this 'half-caste' child? Or is it rather due to a
confusion of identity that comes from the constant reiteration by all characters
that he is not entirely a member of any of their groups? In the case of *Chant*,
either reading is possible. The 'blood' discourse is presented textually in the
film, though it is articulated by characters who are shown to be
unsympathetic. The cultural discourse is less present, but can be understood
as a possible way of making sense of the narrative. Indeed, most films with
Aboriginal characters can be read in these same two ways — 'Aboriginal'
characteristics can be understood as inherited, or as learned. However,
horror films are different — in that they explicitly dramatise the metaphor
which underlies the concept of essentialism.

In the horror genre, it is unsurprising to assert that there is a non-material
aspect to personality. This 'soul' is literally present, and exists quite
independently of the corporeal side of life. These are the spirits which form a
recognisable part of many horror films, and whose interaction with the
material world of individuals takes the form of possession. In films that
seem to stem from *The Exorcist* , spirits and possession have been an
important part of the horror genre[10]. The horror cinema does not have to
negotiate with the alternative discourses of non/materialism. Rather, it takes
to its logical conclusion, and finally *dramatises*, the ideas which underpin the
essentialist view of Aboriginality.

A particularly interesting example of spirits, and their meaning in horror
films, can be seen in *Friday 13th part 9, Jason Goes to Hell*, a film dealing
directly with race. In this instalment of the series, Jason (who started out in
his first film as a very corporeal assassin) has convincingly moved into the
supernatural arena. Although he is killed within the first ten minutes of the
film, most of its running time deals with his spirit moving among cast
members. This spirit is represented at various points in the narrative as a
visual quantity — as streams of lights and so on. It exists as a visible and very
real, but entirely non-physical quality. The first person possessed, who goes
on to become the 'new Jason', is a pathologist working on the body. He is
possessed by Jason's spirit when he chews the gristle from the murderer's
still-beating heart. What happens next draws attention to the relationship of
spirits to race. The pathologist is black. Being possessed by Jason's spirit
does not affect his visible appearance (apart from gaining a rather lumbering

walk). However, when he passes in front of a mirror, the face that is shown in the reflection is that of the (white) Jason Voorhees. In the tradition of horror films, mirrors have traditionally revealed the truth of a person (vampires are soulless and invisible in mirrors, for example). The spirit of Jason is distinct from his material existence (here, the black pathologist). It is related to his essential 'truth'; it is his soul, and his spirit. When that spirit is finally 'reborn of a Voorhees' (by forcing his way into the vagina of his dead sister), it appears in a form physically identical to that it held at the start of the film. Racial identity is distinct from the mere material existence of the people in which it is manifested.

Horror films allow for spirits to be interpreted as real possibilities. Whereas *Chant* makes sense whether Aboriginality is understood to be cultural or essential, these films make sense only to the extent to which an Aboriginal spirit is understood to be working: they *require* a reading that would be classed as 'essentialist'. There is no possibility that the Aboriginal spirit that possesses the heroine's boyfriend in *Kadaicha* is a cultural construct. It *necessarily* exists as an essential, spiritual idea.

Such an understanding of horror's generic constraints suggests particular ways in which a film such as *The Last Wave* might be interpreted. As noted above, this has been referred to by several writers as a good example of the horror genre. If the Aboriginality of the text is interpreted in terms of the spirits which horror films allow, particular forms of Aboriginality are constructed. The narrative involves Richard Chamberlain coming to a realisation of his own Aboriginality (Aboriginal heritage). This growing awareness is signalled in several ways: including his dreams, which are shown to be prophetic and meaningful. It is possible that the narrative trajectory of the film could plausibly be read in non-essentialist terms: the dreams, for example, represent Chamberlain's own growing awareness, knowledges of Aboriginal cultures, subconscious suspicions realised in dreams and so on. However, an understanding of the film as a horror text makes more probable and more meaningful the idea of an Aboriginal spirit, essential and ideal, manifested in and natural to, all individuals of Aboriginal heritage. The reason Chamberlain starts to see prophetic images in his dreams is because he has Aboriginal blood in him (and, of course, Aborigines have prophetic dreams, this being a part of their 'dreaming'). Aboriginality is

an essential and not a variable, in this discourse — a static and not a dynamic property.


## B.1.9

Having argued that the presence such Aboriginal spirits suggests that Aboriginality is beyond cultural or material considerations, it must be pointed out that the spirits in these horror films do often, as is common in horror films more generally, have a physical component. Particular objects are present, and through these objects, Aboriginality is further rendered essential — and in a way that has particular gains for an identity hungry settler culture.

In *The Dreaming*, Aboriginality is manifest in a bracelet. Merely touching this amulet causes the heroine's arm immediately to be possessed by a spirit of Aboriginality — it begins to draw pictures of sacred sites. In keeping with that visibility which has always been so essential in marking racial difference, this possession is then illustrated by the appearance of 'Aboriginal' patterns on the wrist of the possessed arm. The bracelet's meaning is no longer produced in relation to the culture which made it, the information which is circulated around it, or the knowledge Cathy has of it: beyond all such cultural considerations, the bracelet *means* Aboriginality — and can indeed transmit this quality to Cathy.

Similarly, in *Kadaicha*, the stone of the title appears magically in the beds of the teenagers. For a victim to merely possess this stone guarantees the presence of the Aboriginal spirit. Again, in *Initiation*, the Aboriginal wise man holds a magic crystal, which shows his visions. It glows and plays back the images magically.

It is not unusual in horror films for objects to carry meaning and potency which are essential attributes, and which exist quite independently of the *perception* of that meaning by any character. One obvious example would be the Necronomicon in the *Evil Dead* films. This book is meaningful not in its *interpretation*, but in its very *self*. What is deadly about it is not that it carries information that a villain (or an innocent hero) may use. Rather, all a

character need do is touch the book in order to release the powers held within: the pages turn themselves as this evil flows from it. Another example of this tendency comes in the *Hellraiser* trilogy, and its Chinese puzzle-box. This object is not meaningful simply in terms of the culture to which it refers (its meaning as manufactured material object). Rather, it is innately evil. Knowing nothing of its history, nothing of its meaning, characters find that in merely touching the box (technically, in solving it, but simply to touch it sends it spinning madly into solving itself), evil is released, and doorways into hell opened.

The idea that objects carry within them essential spirits is meaningful in the horror genre. It can be read as probable (it fulfils the requirements of verisimilitude) in these horror films of the Aboriginal. And it is worth noting that in an Australian context, the idea of such a container of an Aboriginal spirit seems to be an immensely useful one for a settler culture which is trying to validate its own origins. One of the most obvious aspects of Australian racism, in comparison with that of other cultures, is the way in which Aborigines have always been imbricated in the settlers' search for origin and belonging. Annette Hamilton, for example, notes a 'deep ambivalence' towards Aboriginality in the national imaginary, its position 'at the empty heart of the Australian consciousness' (Hamilton, 1990: 18). Bearing this in mind, the idea that Aboriginal art objects bring with them an 'Aboriginality' is a very useful one: for it implies that this spirit of the original Australia is open to purchase by any Australian with sufficient capital. This is part of the process Hamilton describes as 'an appropriation of commodified images, which permits critical and valuable aspects of 'the Other' as essentially part of itself' (Hamilton, 1990: 18). Here, it is not only the image which is commodified, but the spirit itself: and the ability to commodify spirits is a valuable one in a capitalist culture. For while Cathy's hand may be possessed by the bracelet, it is she in turn who possesses that bracelet: and with it, the spirit of Australia.

## B.1.10

Different filmic genres are understood to have different relationships to social reality. Documentary and social realism, for example, are perceived to be very close to lived experience. By contrast, horror films belong to a group of genres, broadly 'science fiction, horror, swords and sorcery' which are understood as 'fantasy' (James Donald, 1989a: 4). This avowedly fantastic status suggests that care must be taken when making generalisations about the way in which Aboriginality in horror films will be interpreted. The experience of watching a film which is generically understood to be 'fantasy' may be quite different from that of interpreting a text which is perceived to relate more directly to 'reality' (social problem films, police films, perhaps even thrillers). There is a space available in the interpretation for a disavowal, a distance from the film's images, allowing for a different — perhaps a more comfortable — viewing experience. Certainly, it has been suggested that Australian cinema often refuses to deal with the contemporary fact of the Aboriginal existence by insistently placing Aboriginality in historical settings (Turner, 1989b: 116). Horror films similarly provide a distance from what is presented by articulating it within a space labelled 'fantasy'. It seems reasonable to suggest that this generic alignment will promote readings of non-relevance — that what is being seen on the screen is entertainment rather than information or issue. Ironically, this very fact may render horror films a particularly valuable space in which to represent the Aboriginal. As Steve Mickler's work suggests, Aboriginality in Australia is overwhelmingly reported as a social issue; as a problem (Mickler, 1992). Local cinema has indeed found little difficulty in engaging with Aboriginality as a social problem: in *Short Changed* (George Ogilvie, 1985), *The City's Edge* (Ken Quinnell, 1983), *Blackfellas* (James Ricketson, 1993), and so on. In each of these films a 'realist' mode allows for an articulation of the Aboriginal 'problem' — in these examples centred around the difficulties of urban Aborigines. The image of the Aborigine is linked directly with petty crime, alcoholism, violence and so on in a recognisable semiotic chain. In the face of such an insistent focus on serious and relevant difficulties, white responses to Aboriginality become defensively bored:

> Every Thursday night, guilt. A crisis of conscience: we know that we should
> be watching *Heartland* on the ABC. But we always end up watching Channel
> 10 — *NYPD Blue* and *The X-Files* ... (Turnbull and Thompson, 1994: 31)

The correct responses to representations of the Aboriginal, it seems, revolve
around guilt: even in relation to a mini-series like *Heartland*, whose express
project was to be seen to be entertaining rather than didactic (Lawrence,
1994b).

In horror films, this is not the case. Another, very different set of emotional
responses is promoted; and there is a constant generic reassurance that this is
fantasy. This representation need not, expectations of the genre inform the
audience, be interpreted in relation to experienced reality: it can rather be
consumed purely as entertainment. In providing an arena where this is the
case, and Aboriginality is still represented, horror films are one of the most
interesting sets of Aboriginal texts in contemporary Australia.

## B.1.11

Robin Wood has suggested that the spectator's position in relation to horror
films is a curiously resistant one: 'Many people who go regularly to horror
films profess to ridicule them, and go in order to laugh' (1978: 25). This
audience stance is promoted in horror films, which are regularly self-
reflexive: both in 'artistic' ways (those textual features which Telotte is
discussing when he refers to 'the reflexive nature of horror' [1987: 114]); and
more generally, in the presence of comedy.

The presence of comedy elements in horror films is a well-established,
indeed, now dominant trend. Modern horror films with no comic elements
are the exception rather than the rule[11], and the dominant generic mode is a
textual 'horrality' which contains at least 'horror' and 'hilarity' (Brophy, 1986:
3).

The presentation of Aboriginality in these films involves just such moments
of self-aware comedy. In *The Howling III*, these moments are centred around
the production of the film-within-a-film, *Shape Shifters part 8*. At the end of

shoot fancy dress party, some real werewolves turn up (dressed, incongruously enough, in nuns' habits). Naturally, they are invited in, with many admiring comments on their costumes. They massacre everybody there. The video cover of *Zombie Brigade* proclaims — 'SEE your favourite TV stars battle the Undead...the Film that won NO awards — Anywhere!'. Similarly, the mismatch between affective proclamations of intent — the publicity material for *Zombie Brigade* proudly proclaims it to be 'Horror' — and the unconvincing, low-budget 'special effects' of that film open up a generically-typical space for resistant readings.

Steve Neale has argued that the play of dis/belief involved in watching horror films is a very specific one; and it is one that is very similar to that involved in watching comedy. The moments of laughter in the recently dominant comedy-horror genre, work to dramatise part of the horror film reading process — providing an awareness of its nature as film (Neale, 1990: 160); as horror films exhibit it, a 'violent awareness of [themselves] as ]part of] a saturated genre' (Brophy 1986: 5). Horror films may indeed be peculiarly open to interpretations which actively refuse perceived messages; to audience work which doubles itself, firstly attempting to make sense of what the film wants to convey; and then consciously refusing that sense by creating quite contrary interpretations. This should be borne in mind when attempting to talk about the interpretations of Aboriginality which will be made from horror films.

## B.1.12

The example which has run through this chapter, *The Last Wave*, illustrates the way in which particular generic affiliations stabilise particular meanings. When Bruce Kawin takes the films to be a horror, it makes for sense for him to describe the dreams in the films as portraying an alternative world, which is described as 'the other side' (Kawin, 1984: 11). This latter space is most certainly a Western one, a phrase which conjures up spiritualists in Victorian London as much as the haunted dimension of *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982). David's dreams are 'prophetic', their status as real rather than cultural is

unquestioned, and the apocalyptic wave is understood as a magical form of aboriginal [sic] revenge.

The elements of horror films described in this chapter, then, suggest some horizons which might be set in place when these films are activated, not as cultural texts in a racist Australia, but primarily as generic objects, playing to generically literate audiences.

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[1] The psychoanalytic turn can be observed in work arising from Robin Wood's germinal term 'return of the repressed' (Wood, 1978); in the popular area of writing on the gaze and scopophilia in horror (as in Fischer and Landy, 1987); and in feminist work such as that by Barbara Creed (1989) and Carol Clover (1989).

[2] There is no 'Australian horror' genre in Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka's typology of Australian film. The nearest they identify to such a genre is 'Australian Gothic' (Dermody & Jacka, 1988: 49).

[3] The lack of a distinct horror films genre in Australia may be due to the fact that the typical 'Australian narrative' of human failure in the face of a threatening, sublime Other (Turner, 1989) is already a horror narrative. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir, 1975) and *The Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1977) are very similar narratives. In *Hoffman's Guide to SF, Horror and Fantasy Movies*, *Picnic* is listed, in their neat generic labelling scheme, as 'Horror/Thriller' (Hoffman, 1991: 286); while *Weekend* is explicitly horror.

[4] This diagnostic approach, reading horror films in terms of contemporary social problems has proved to be an enduringly popular one in film theory. See Pirie, 1973: 31; Hooper, 1974; Scott, 1979; Prawer, 1980: 11; Dickstein, 1984: 66; Grant 1984: xii; Kawin, 1984: 5; Derry, 1987: 163; Lucanio, 1987; Rockett, 1988: 40; Schechter, 1992.

[5] Robin Wood writes 'An introduction to the American horror film' (1984); Andrew Britton edits a collection entitled *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (1979); Gregory Waller's is called *American Horrors: Essays on the modern American horror film* (1987).

6  See particularly the two series: *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968);
    *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1979); *Day of the Dead* (Romero, 1985); *Evil
    Dead* (Raimi, 1980); *II* (Raimi, 1987); *III* (Raimi, 1994).  The second
    Romero and the (cinema recut of the) third Raimi film are particularly
    interesting in this context, both linking zombie-ness to American
    consumer culture.

7  In horror generally, the monstrous is often understood in terms of Western
    Christianity and its concomitant devil figures — as in *Prince of
    Darkness*, (Carpenter, 1987); *The Omen, I - IV* (Donner, 1976; Taylor,
    1978; Baker, 1981; Montesi, 1991), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973),
    *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968) — or to other, less explicitly Christian,
    Western narratives of the unknown — folk tales, witches, werewolves
    (Schechter, 1992).

8  Examples include films such as *Dream Demon* (Cockliss, 1988); *Dreamaniac*
    (DeCoteau, 1986); *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain* (Scavolini, 1981); and
    *Nightmare Castle* (Caiano, 1965).

9  Charles Derry (1977) writes under the title *Dark Dreams: a Psychological
    History of the American Horror Film*; and goes in 1987 to 'More Dark
    Dreams'.  J P Telotte (1985) entitles his work *Dreams of Darkness*.  Kim
    Newman calls his survey of horror *Nightmare Movies* (1988).   Andrew
    Britton's collection is entitled *American Nightmare* (1979).  Lester
    Freidman writes of 'Canyons of Nightmare' (1986); Noel Carroll's piece
    in 1981 is entitled 'Nightmare and the horror film'; and so on.  In short,
    horror films are 'conceived as a kind of collective dreamworld
    requiring analysis by methods derived from one or other tradition of
    psychoanalysis' (Tudor, 1989: 2.  See also, Robin Wood, 1978: 25;
    Morris Dickstein, 1984: 69; Gregory Waller, 1987: 6; and Bruce Kawin,
    1984: 5).

10 *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) is perhaps the seminal movie in this regard.  It
    is followed by *The Exorcist II* (Boorman, 1977); *III* (Blatty, 1990); *The
    Entity* (Furie, 1981); *Amityville II: the Possession* (Damian, 1982); and
    *Friday 13th part 9* (Marcus, 1993), among man others.

11 From the *Evil Dead* films to *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)
    and its progeny, the *House* series (Steve Miner, 1986), to *Hellraiser*'s
    most recent sequel (Tony Randel, 1988), there are always at least

moments of self-relexive comedy, of stepping outside the narrative to make jokes at the unlikely nature of the whole business.

# Chapter B.2: Soapies

## B.2.1

Despite the consistent popularity of soap operas and other drama serials on broadcast television, the place of Aboriginality in these forms has been little addressed by critical literature. Any discussion of Aboriginal presence tends to take the form of a fleeting sentence suggesting that Aboriginality in the soaps is characterised largely by absence (Dowmunt, 1991: 40; Jakubowicz [ed], 1994: 57; Molnar, 1994a: 19)[1].

It is certainly true that in comparison to the vast number of characters appearing on television drama serials, a disproportionately small number are of anything other than Anglo-Celtic descent. *The Sullivans* (Crawfords for Channel Nine, 1976-1982); *Sons and Daughters* (Grundy for Channel Seven, 1982-1987); *The Box* (Crawfords for Channel Ten, 1974-1977); *No 96* (Cash Harmon, for Channel Ten, 1972-1978); *Chances* (Beyond Productions for Channel Nine, 1991-1992); *Richmond Hill* (Grundy for Channel Ten, 1988); *E-Street* (Westside Television Productions for Channel Ten, 1989-1993); *Echo Point* (Southern Star for Channel Ten, 1995); it is true that none of these programs has ever featured an Aboriginal character in a speaking role. Simply to restate this absence, however, is not always helpful. Several soapies have employed Aboriginal actors: the work of those characters must be worthy of more detailed analysis.

Once again, the fact that these representations are occurring on soapies is taken to be a pertinent fact. The ways in which such characters are interpreted can be limited by those horizons of familiarity that the form of the soap opera supplies a literate viewer. To take an example, the Aboriginal park ranger Trevor (Michael Watson) in *A Country Practice,* could be read, in terms of his job, as once again trapping Aborigines in the arena of nature. However, for audiences who are watching the program as a soap opera, this might not be the case: other, generically privileged aspects of the character

might, as will be explored below, prove more germane to the work of interpretation.

## B.2.2

The generic schema here invoked is that which is constructed by viewers around a particular group of television programs: those comprehensible as soap operas. Aboriginality is considered in *Prisoner* (Grundy for Channel Ten, 1979-1986); *A Country Practice* (JNP for Channel Seven, 1981-1993, for Channel 10, 1994); *Neighbours* (Grundy for Channel Seven, 1985, for Channel Ten 1985- ); *The Flying Doctors* (Crawfords for Channel Nine, 1986-1992); *Home and Away* (Channel Seven, 1988- ); and *GP* (ABC, 1989- ).

Understanding genre as a moment in an interpretive process allows the present work to sidestep issues of whether all of these programs are 'really' soaps. In Australia, the term 'soapie' carries particular and derogatory implications; the producers of programs such as *GP* and *The Flying Doctors* are often keen to insist that their programs are not soap operas (Best, 1993; Samuelenok, 1993). For the purposes of this work, the pertinent fact is that these programs are discursively circulated as soaps (see, for example, Lawrence, 1994c); and that each of them, with narratives structured in some degree towards 'serial' rather than 'series' forms of closure (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983: 2) and with groups of central cast members rather than eponymous heroes, are textually comprehensible in this way (Geraghty, 1991: 17). These 'soaps', or 'serials' are the focus of this chapter.

Approaching these programs from a generically-oriented perspective, what elements of the texts are important in making interpretations of Aboriginal characters? As in the previous chapter, elements of a schema are drawn from critical writing in the area, cross-referenced with personal experience of watching these programs.

The work of Christine Geraghty (1991) on the textual organisation of soapies suggests that the fact of large central casts is used and understood in these programs in particular ways. These groups of characters are soap opera's 'communities', with all of the implications of exclusion and inclusion implied

by that word. Such an understanding of soaps is supported by Robert Allen's 'semiotic' work on the programs, which suggests that the meaning of characters is quite explicitly established through their network of relationships with other regular characters (Allen, 1985)[2]. Australian soaps often make explicit the importance of community; in assertions that 'Everybody needs good neighbours'; in a celebration at the Coopers Crossing pub (*Flying Doctors*); or in the socially-responsible attitude of Pippa as she offers a home to foster children (*Home and Away*).

Geraghty suggests that the community formed by the regular characters in soap operas is continually in negotiation, viewers continually asking who is to be admitted and who excluded from the social framework. The boundaries of the community group are marked and re-marked in the repeated placing of some characters outside the central community:

> The community in soaps...is a structure in which the setting and the past provide the framework and the family provides the model for relationships. It depends on notions of mutual support and acceptance and defines itself in terms of its differences from the rest of the world. But the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are not always clear, and many soap stories are concerned with the difficulties of marking them out. One further strategy in creating a sense of community is to exclude those who do not belong, and to clarify the difference between those inside the community and those outside it (Geraghty: 1991: 100).

Most interesting, in relation to this work, are the comments she then goes on to make in relation to liminal characters — those characters in whose presentation there is a play between acceptance by the group, and rejection as an unacceptable Other:

> [T]he division between the inside and the outside is not always...clear. Many characters hover on the boundaries, moving between acceptance and rejection as the situation demands... (Geraghty, 1991: 101).

Geraghty's examples are character roles such as the 'gossip', the 'bastard' and the 'tart' (Geraghty, 1991: 101). However, it seems that this concept of liminal characters, involved in a constant play of exclusion and inclusion from the serial community, may also be a useful one for interrogating Australian

drama serial representation of Aboriginality. The very word 'community' is a
potent one when discussing the formation of ideas of race. As Benedict
Anderson's book puts it, nations are *Imagined Communities* (1983); the process
by which nationalist and racist ideologies define a group as 'others' precisely
involves an understanding of who is 'we' and who is 'not we' — that is,
defining the limit of 'our' community.

The work of deciding what position a soapie character holds within the
program's central community is here taken to be a vital part of interpretive
work which invokes the schema of soap as a genre. It is in relation to this
positioning that Aboriginality will be discussed.

### B.2.3

Aboriginal characters have appeared on soap operas for as long as the genre
has been popular in Australia. Bob Maza recalls playing lawyer in the ABC
soap opera, *Bellbird* (ABC, 1967), a short-term character (Maza, 1993), who
'just happened to be Aboriginal' (Bostock, 1990: 13). From this start,
Aboriginal characters have appeared in a variety of situations in a range of
serials.

*Prisoner* features Justine Saunders as a prison psychologist and Kylie Belling
as a riotous Aboriginal prisoner. *A Country Practice* includes Ian Watson as a
'semi-regular' park ranger; and a wide range of other, shorter term characters
who function over a few episodes (Paul Williams as a boxer, Gary Foley as
minister, Rachel Maza as a lawyer). *Home and Away* has Wesley Patten as
'Kevin' for three months, in episodes first broadcast in Australia in the latter
half of 1993. *The Flying Doctors* features Kylie Belling for one season as a
regular character, and Warren Owens as a returning, irregular character; it
has also provided opportunities for a range of single episode Aboriginal
characters (Gary Foley as a troublesome father, Kristine Nehm as an
expectant woman, Ernie Dingo as a father caught between two worlds). *GP*
allows a few characters to appear in single episodes addressing Aboriginality
— one case of reverse racism, one Aboriginal criminal, Ernie Dingo as an
Aboriginal medical student caught between two cultures — and some
characters played by Aboriginal actors where race is not an issue. In

*Neighbours*, Aboriginality occurs as a plot point when a young girl must deal with a cursed rock from Uluru; and later, in a more material form, as the character Sally Pritchard (Brenda Webb) comes to terms with her Aboriginal identity.

A more detailed serialography of Aboriginal presence is provided in an appended teleography to this thesis.

How are these Aboriginal characters placed in relation to the generically vital communities of these programs? A variety of textual factors contribute to the production of the group status of all characters in soap operas.


### B.2.4

The title sequences of Australian television serials are important sources of information about community. Following American rather than British examples, the opening credits of many programmes immediately establish those cast members who are to be the important members of the community, even before the narrative opens. If a character appears in the title credits, then that character is quickly marked as regular, familiar, and playing a large part in the community.

In the case of *A Country Practice*, the characters and the actors are presumed to be so familiar that no character, nor actor names are presented over the opening shots; but this is an unusually presumptuous approach to the familiarity of the central characters. Most programs (*GP*, *Neighbours*, *Home and Away*, *The Flying Doctors*) present the faces of regular cast members along with either the actor's or the character's name.

Taking account of the importance of these title sequences for immediately establishing centrality, it is important to note that no Australian television serial has ever allowed an Aboriginal character a regular place in such a title sequence. Even when Kylie Belling is playing the regular character 'Sharon' in the first season of *The Flying Doctors*, the title sequence features only flying and medical personnel. As a non-medical ground worker, Sharon is relegated to the secondary status of the townspeople: ancillary rather than central.

Similarly, in those episodes of *Home and Away* where Wesley Patten plays the character of Kevin (five times a week for three months), there is no space in the titles for his character. He is relegated to secondary status and credited at the end of the programme, alongside incidental, single-line characters. Indeed, if these end credits are truncated (as often happened in the British broadcasts of the programme), he is not credited at all. Neither Justine Saunders nor Kylie Belling ever made it to the (admittedly, stunted) titles of *Prisoner*; Michael Watson was not given a place in *A Country Practice*; and Sally was not enough of a regular to feature at the start of *Neighbours*.

Through the defined community of the opening titles, Aboriginal characters have been excluded from central positions in all Australian drama serials so far produced.

### B.2.5

In a long running drama serial, characters necessarily leave the programme; new ones arrive; old ones reappear (*Flying Doctors, A Country Practice*). And the length of a character's stay in the programme will provide at least an indication of how far they will be integrated within a community. A new character, or even a returning one, may well be regarded with initial suspicion by other regular characters. By contrast, those who have been in a programme for years will have developed that richness which comes from the palimpsest of different storylines and sets of relationships within the community's paradigm.

Aboriginal characters have not remained as long-haul characters in the soapies. Some appear only for a single episode, mostly in those serials which address 'issues', and have a degree of series (complete episode) narrative. The effect of such representation will be discussed below.

Other characters are regular, but for only a short period, certainly less than is typically the case for serials: twenty episodes for Kylie Belling in *The Flying Doctors*; three months for Wesley Patten in *Home and Away*; three stories (eight episodes) for Rachel Maza in *A Country Practice*; eleven episodes for Justine Saunders and nine for Kylie Belling in *Prisoner*. These characters tend to be

associated with single, specific narratives being worked out (although this is less true of *The Flying Doctors*). In *Home and Away*, Kevin must decide whether to leave his family to pursue a training in art; in *A Country Practice*, Ruth falls in love and decides to marry the white Chris; in *Prisoner*, Sarah's violent behaviour must be traced back to difficulties with her foster parents, and the iniquity of the assimilation system. Such finite narratives are unusual in serial dramas. Regular core characters will not be so unidirectional. Rather, the very complexity of soap opera characters comes from the variety of narrative strands through which they are processed. To suggest that a character has completed her/his function when s/he has finished a single storyline runs very much against the logic of the serial community: and works, again, as a strong marker of who is comprised within and who is excluded from a programme's community.

A third strategy for introducing Aboriginal characters in Australian serials, and again one which produces a sense of uncertainty in relation to position in the soap's community, is the 'semi-regular' character. This term is used by Susan Bower, of *A Country Practice* to describe Trevor Jackson (Ian Watson), the park ranger in that programme. He and Dougie Kennedy (Warren Owens) in *The Flying Doctors*, play characters which occur repeatedly, over a period of time, but are not in every, or even many, episodes. Once again, these characters are not fully accepted into the community. The role they play seems to be closer to that identified by Geraghty, the liminal characters whose very ambivalence works to negotiate the boundaries of community.

## B.2.6

As John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins suggest, regular viewers of a television program make interpretations of episodes explicitly in terms of other episodes of that program. There are, in short, generic expectations for each individual show (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995).

For example, in many of these serial dramas, romance is a genre norm. Across the spectrum of programmes here under consideration, romance is more or less foregrounded as an expected narrative component. In *Home and Away*, and on *Neighbours*, most characters will be involved in some form of

romantic plot on a regular basis. By contrast, in *A Country Practice, The Flying Doctors* or *GP*, where casts are smaller, romance is more selective and more serious, leading either to marriage or broken hearts. *Prisoner* represents a fascinating confirmation of this generic rule: although set in an all-woman gaol, romance plots are made possible through male warders, male characters outside the prison, and even the possibility of lesbian relationships.

In such a context, the dearth of romantic plots for Aboriginal actors in soaps works to mark their characters as excluded from the central concerns of the community. Neither of the 'semi-regular' characters is involved in any romantic interest. Occasionally, single episode characters in programmes have been involved in romances — as with Kristine Nehm and Michael Watson in *The Flying Doctors*, 'The Longing'. As a young couple expecting their first baby, they are played as very much in love. Such romance, though — introduced as a fait accompli and abruptly leaving the narrative after a single story — is not what serial norms expect. The long term interest and extended period of problematic disruption which characterises serial romance is absent. This is similarly true of Rachel Maza's character in *A Country Practice*. In the serial for three stories, Maza is romantically inducted into the community. A romance develops over several episodes with Chris, a white character who, although not a regular either, is firmly tied into the community in his position as Dr Elliot's son. Their romance leads to on-screen kissing (perhaps the only example of Aboriginal-white kissing in a serial) and marriage. However, again, short length of stay undermines the power of this romance to place the characters solidly within the community. As a newcomer to the programme, Chris is no more of a regular character than Rachel Maza's lawyer; he in fact appears in the programme after her, and begins the romance with her in his very first story ('Thursday's Child'). With the proposal of marriage, both he and Maza leave the programme. A similar situation occurs with Sally in *Neighbours*. Turning up as an old friend of a central character, Gaby, Sally teaches Japanese at the local school for seven weeks. In that time, she is involved in an ongoing romance plot, as one of her pupils, Rick, becomes infatuated with her. This storyline is abruptly brought to a halt, though, when 'John', an old friend of Sally's, turns up. She realises that in fact she is in love with him, and quickly leaves the program to settle down with him. In serial terms, marriage is not a generically

appropriate point at which to end a storyline. It is merely a part of an ongoing process. The fact that both Rachel Maza's lawyer, and Sally, leave the program on the eve of marriages, again excludes them from the generically-marked central community.

More complex accounts of a refusal of a narrative norm can be found in the two longest running serial characters — Wesley Patten in *Home and Away* and Kylie Belling in *The Flying Doctors*. In the former instance, *Home and Away* is, beside *Neighbours*, one of the most insistently romance-oriented serials. In those episodes featuring Patten's character, there are seventeen other regular characters, most of these are either involved in relationships, actively trying to get involved in relationships, breaking up, or married. Despite this setting, in the course of three months, there is at no point any suggestion of romantic involvement for Kevin. He forms close friendships with girls and women (Angel and Roxanne), but is not in love with anyone. No-one is in love with him. He evinces no interest in the romantic side of things. No character comments on his singleness: it is not even presented as an issue. Romance is not, in three months of the program, ever related to Kevin.

Analysing one episode in detail illustrates this absence. In the episode first broadcast in Australia on 6 October 1994, there are four major plots. Sarah is worried about her date with Troy, because she is too frightened to wear a revealing bikini. Shane and Kevin (Wesley Patten) are fighting over the former's threats to make fake Aboriginal paintings to sell; Angel is threatening to break up her relationship with Shane over his attitude to this; and Roxanne and Luke are competing to try to get dates. This is an atypically romantically inclined episode (in the episode of 1 October 1994, for example, there are no romance plots); but it indicates sufficiently well the central place this narrative concern can hold in the programme.

In the narrative strand featuring Angel and Shane, the relationship is indicated in close physical contact, including long and intense kissing scenes. The narrative deals with Shane's determination to put money ahead of friendship and go ahead with his scheme to produce the fake Aboriginal art. When this is resolved at the end of the episode, his relationship with Angel is secured (this is signalled by a freeze-frame of a kiss between the two). In the Sarah/Troy storyline, Sarah comes to discover the meaning of true love. She

believes Troy will not want her if she does not try to be trendy. Angel and Ailsa must explain to her that if Troy does not love her for who she is, then he is not worth having. The third storyline features Rox and Luke — flatmates whose competitive banter has in a previous episode lead to Rox threatening to leave the flat — competing not be seen as 'social lepers'. Rox has a date on Friday night. Luke has not. She lords this over him, leading him to moan to Nick about how he hates being single, and to say of Shane's love troubles, 'At least he has a romance to interrupt'. Luke is obviously unhappy with his single status. Later in the episode, though, Rox is stood up by 'John Smedhurst', her date for the evening (an unseen character). She returns home, moaning that it is ridiculous that she has come so low as to have to go on a date with this man, who she does not fancy, and did not really want to spend the evening with anyway. In this, her earlier protestations that she was quite happy to be going out on a purely platonic date are undercut: she is really unhappy not to be romantically linked as well. In the final scene of this strand, Luke and Rox sit together in front of the television, obviously both unhappy with the situation. Rox comments that surely it must be possible for them to enjoy just staying home for an evening as friends, but performance and timing suggest that this is, in fact, not the case. The implication is that for a young character to be in a situation with no romantic involvement is a narrative problem — that the natural state for each character is to be in a romantic relationship. In *Home and Away*, this is true.

On the other hand, Kevin's storyline in this episode has no relation to romance. He is involved in argument with Shane. For the latter character, this dispute has a direct impact on his love life; this is not the case for Kevin. He has no love life; and his lack of romance is not a focus for the narrative. The insistent exclusion of the character from such a generically central narrative concern marks his place in the *Home and Away* community as unstable.

The most delicate example of the footwork which can be employed in allowing an Aboriginal character into a romantic community, while simultaneously denying full entry, can be seen in the case of Kylie Belling's period as 'Sharon' in the first season of *The Flying Doctors*. In this program, there is a hint of a romance between Sharon and the character of 'Dave' (the *Flying Doctors'* pilot during this season). But this romance is uncertain; it is

textually ambivalent. During the first thirteen episodes of the season, the characters become friendly, involving themselves in confidential chats and walking together between plot sites. At first, there is no suggestion that romance is involved; and in serials at least, it is not unusual for men and women to be friends. However, in episode fourteen, 'Departures', the plot takes a noticeable change of tack. Sharon has decided to leave Cooper's Crossing to make a career in the city. According to Crawfords' production notes: 'Everyone is stunned, including Gibson, who has become very fond of her. A romantic interlude evolves which reveals the expression of difficult emotions'. This might seem quite explicit. But in the text of the programme, it is less so.

When Sharon (Kylie's character) announces her departure, editing and performance suggest that Dave ('Gibson') is particularly upset by this news: she says that she has a place on a Social Welfare course in Sydney, and there is a reaction shot of Dave, looking upset at the idea — eyebrows furrowed and mouth hard. Sharon looks around the group, smiling. However, when her glance falls on Dave, her expression changes to one of concern. Dave says — his performance one of unconvincing bravado — 'We've got some celebrating to do' and another shot shows her biting her lip. This scene in itself suggests a strange relationship. They are not close enough to have discussed this move before Sharon announces it publicly: and they are not close enough for Dave's reaction to be one of anger (that is, there is obviously no commitment between them). But each is aware of the difficulty Sharon's announcement causes for the other.

In the next scene, Chris and Sharon are walking towards the pub to celebrate. As Dave enters in the background of the shot, and calls out 'Sharon', Chris says to Sharon, 'I'll see you in the pub', leaving the shot and the two of them together. This suggests that Chris is aware of Sharon's feelings for Dave. This makes it even more unusual that there is no other discussion of this situation between Chris and Sharon at any point in the first season.

When Sharon and Dave are left alone, an awkward scene ensues where neither is explicit in declaring feelings — 'Are you angry at me?'; 'No. It's what you've always wanted'.

Later in the episode, the couple have a moonlit scene on a bandstand —
constructed with all the signifiers of romance (crickets sing in the
background).  As Sharon explains her decision to leave, Dave retorts angrily,
'We're supposed to be mates'.  The use of this term suggests a strange
dynamic.  'Mates' and 'mateship' are powerful and suggestive terms in the
construction of Australian identity.  The charge they carry is of strong but
asexual bonding, usually between men.  The application of such a word to the
relationship between Dave and Sharon works to deromanticise it.

At the end of this scene, Dave invites Sharon back to his place.  She comes,
but he is then worried about what the neighbours will think.  She asserts that
there is nothing for the neighbours to think about, as there is nothing going
on between them — no 'mucking around' — 'I just wanted something to eat'.
They fight about this and she storms out.

The next day, there is a reconciliation scene.  Both accept that they have
behaved badly.  The intimate reverse shots of their looks, and the piano music
which plays in the background suggest romance or love.  By contrast, the
performances and dialogue, where he says 'Come on' and drags her off by an
arm around her shoulder signal 'mateship' again — it is casual rather than
gentle contact.  This is the only physical contact between the two in these
scenes.  If there is any romance present, it is not signalled by anything as
blatant as a kiss, for example.

This sets the tone for the relationship between them: involving many of the
signifiers of romance, but insistently denying that romance is involved.  This
ambivalent relationship continues right up to David's untimely death, in 'Into
the Future', crashing his aeroplane just after deciding to leave Cooper's
Crossing.  This event again leads to strangely non-committal reactions from
Sharon.  Non-verbal performance and codes of editing (big close ups at
appropriate moments) establish the fact that Sharon has a particular concern
for the welfare of this man; but that concern is never vocalised, nor
acknowledged by any other member of the community.

Whether this ambivalent (lack of) romance was in fact the result of explicit
network censorship of inter-racial romance (Alcorn, 1988: 5) is less important
than the fact that it is textually unmistakable.  For an audience aware of the

generic propensity to ground characters in romance, such ambivalence marks very clearly the liminal status of Kylie Belling's character.


### B.2.7

Apart from the specific case of romance, the entire web of relationships in which a character is involved will make clear their status in the community (Allen, 1985). Trevor Jackson, the park ranger of *A Country Practice*, for example, is constructed as intimate with several central characters. In his first episode, 'The Dreamkeeper' (781), his Aboriginality is foregrounded as a narrative problem (will he get in touch with his Aboriginal spirituality?); but despite this, his induction into the community is unproblematic. He has found an injured cat and brings it into the vet's surgery. When he first walks in, there are no reaction shots from the vet or her friend. Indeed, on an initial, innocent viewing, one would presume Trevor to be a regular character. There is no suggestion of surprise on their part at his being a stranger, or discomfort at his Aboriginality. He calls from off stage — 'Hello' — and Steve (the vet) shouts, 'Oh, come in'. Trevor enters, and goes through all of his business with the injured cat before he is even introduced. It is only after this short scene is concluded, a scene in which he is already functioning as a friendly member of the group, that Matt steps forward — 'You must be the new park ranger. I'm Matt Tyler, the vet'. 'G'day', the other replies. 'Trevor Jackson'. From this casual introduction, Trevor takes up a position in the community largely in relation to the regular character Luke. They are regularly presented as friends. Although Trevor's house is not a functional narrative space — a signal of his uncertain status in the programme — he casually spends time at Luke's. Similarly, Trevor is shown to be friendly with the regular character Anna, in the episode 'Snakes and Ladders'.

In *Prisoner*, the short-stay Aboriginal characters form complex sets of relationships with regulars on both sides of the prison system. Justine Saunders' character, Pamela Madigan, is introduced as a close friend (and ex-drinking buddy) of Ann Reynolds (Gerda Nicolson), the prison warden. Pamela first appears at the door of Anne's house: the warden is a largely sympathetic character in the program, regularly shown to be understanding,

fair and concerned (in direct contrast to Maggie Kirkpatrick's 'The Freak'). The closeness of Pamela's friendship with this central and sympathetic character places her as part of the regular community. The program insists that the pair are close, long time friends. This is suggested by the humour shown in their scenes together — 'Well, you gonna invite me in, or should we bring the chairs out here?', Madigan asks; when Anne offers her a drink — 'Sherry? Brandy?', Pamela demands, 'Whatever happened to beer?', and they both end up drinking tinnies. The incongruity suggests the relaxed nature of their friendship.

In the prison, Pamela is quickly integrated into a position of authority over the prisoners. Narratively, it is established that she is a 'counsellor' — here to 'help Aboriginal girls cope with being locked up — get them out of the downward spiral'. Entering the prison building, she is part of a group of warders who have to deal with catching two of the female prisoners streaking down a corridor. In a later episode, she is further integrated as other prison officers claim that everyone in the prison 'thinks very highly of her'.

The trajectory of Kylie Belling's character — Sarah, the Aboriginal prisoner — is towards acceptance as a functional part of the faction-ridden prisoner community. On her arrival in the prison, Pamela (who is Sarah's case worker) attempts to persuade another inmate, Rita (the dominant prisoner) to help the warders in their quest to 'tame young Sarah West'. Rita agrees. The movement of the narrative from this point is one of gradual prisoner-community acceptance of Sarah. The storyline deals with the racist attitudes of prisoners such as Spider, and the difficulty of 'young Sarah West' in coping with white friendship. By the time she leaves the program, her relationships with other characters have developed into secure friendships; indeed, she is willing to sacrifice herself to save Rita, the 'Top Dog' whom she admires and respects, and who is similarly fond of her.

Generally, the non-romantic relationships involving regular Aboriginal characters in these serials work to promote their acceptance into the communities of the programs. Even here, though, there are ambivalent exceptions. In *The Flying Doctors*, for example, the episode in which Dave is killed ends with an informal wake after the funeral. Held in the local pub, all of Dave's friends get together and come to the conclusion that he would have

wanted to be remembered by people having a good time. They dance to upbeat music. This is a prime example of the 'shared community rituals' which Geraghty's identifies as textual markers of 'community achieved' (Geraghty, 1991: 88). But Sharon is excluded from this scene. Despite her privileged status in relation to Dave — or perhaps because of it — she is not invited to join the rest of the Coopers Crossing community in this symbolic ceremony of renewal. It is a noticeable absence.

### B.2.8

If genres are understood as sanctioned bodies of relative intertexts from which interpretive schemata are formed, then it makes sense to suggest that on one level, each serial comprises its own genre (Caughie, 1991: 135). Although romance, for example, occurs fairly consistently across the serials, there are also differences between the programs. The character of each may be known as a series of expectations about what is acceptable in that program (for example, vampires and voodoo undead are entirely admissible in *Chances*; less so in *The Sullivans*).

One difference in expectations across the genre of serials is the extent to which resolvable, single-episode narratives will be foregrounded; and the way in which readings should be made of these. A disproportionate number of the programmes to feature Aboriginality have been those where 'series' narrative tendencies (towards single-episode narrative closure) are visible (Alvarado and Tulloch, 1983: 3). *GP*, *The Flying Doctors*, and *A Country Practice* each use separate titles for individual episodes, even though there are also continuing, 'serial' elements involving their central characters. The generic norm for each of these programs is, to some degree, that each episode will deal with an 'issue'. These issues are most often associated directly with a character who is an outsider, not a regular member of the serial community, and who functions in the program purely as a bearer of that issue.

Several times in *GP*, Aboriginal characters play just this recognisable role; functioning as outsiders and as the bearers of issues. 'Beat it' deals with an Aboriginal criminal at a half-way house; 'Sloan Street' addresses reverse racism against a white doctor; 'Crossroads' features Ernie Dingo as an

Aboriginal medical student worried about becoming too white; 'Special places' deals with racism in a country town. In another program which can deal with 'issues', *A Country Practice*, Paul Williams appears in one story as an Aboriginal boxer, dealing with issues of violence ('The Contender'). Similarly, in *The Flying Doctors*, quite apart from Sharon and Dougie, Aboriginality motivates a whole collection of issue narratives: about Land Rights ('Is nothing sacred'), the efficacy of Aboriginal medicine (The Forbidden'), and the massacre of Aborigines at time of settlement ('A Distant Echo') among others (see the appended tele-orgaphy for a more complete account).

It may be that in the context of these programs, what is most important about their representations of Aboriginality is not so much the part the characters play in the single episode, as the fact that, in the wider context of *GP*, or *A Country Practice* as serials, it is known that such characters do appear only for a single episode; and explicitly function as bearers of 'issues'. In the example of the *GP* episode 'Crossroads', for example, the representations of Aboriginality can easily be read in very positive ways. Julie, the *GP* secretary, visits her son in the country town where he is living. When there is nowhere in the town for Julie to stay, Aboriginal hospitality is emphasised as she is invited to stay with a friend of her son's. The Aboriginal family, lead by the matriarch Dolly (Justine Saunders), is represented in a cheerful, upbeat way — having fun and mucking around. Eddie (Ernie Dingo), the local Aboriginal doctor around whom the narrative revolves, is shown to be competent doctor — 'It could be meningitis?' — 'There's no photophobia'. He is intelligent and incisive, presenting a voice of reason on Aboriginal social difficulties — 'The problem's not the grog...What you see is the blackfella getting drunk — but there's a lot of hurt you don't see'; 'It's called communications breakdown — when education is lacking, embarrassment sets in'. However, in the context of *GP*, it is apparent to audiences that Julie is the central character, and Aboriginality is the issue. Next week, the serial will show Julie, the other doctors, and Alzheimer's disease, or bulimia, or child abuse. The Aboriginal characters will not be seen again. Even if this particular episode does not privilege Julie's point of view — indeed, at one point her racism is made apparent as she assumes that Eddie is a nurse rather than a full doctor — a generically-literate audience are well aware that she is

the regular, the familiar character. Ernie Dingo does not return to *GP*. He vanishes, along with his 'issue', after a single episode.

The single-episode Aboriginal 'issue' sometimes functions as presenting a challenge to the core soap community. For example, in *The Flying Doctors'* episode 'A Distant Echo', the single-episode Aboriginal visitor almost kills a regular character, and disrupts the whole sense of Cooper's Crossing community identity. Dave (Buddha Pryor) is a local Aboriginal university graduate. Studying local history, he reveals that Henry Cooper, the founder of the town and Violet Carnegie's great-grandfather, in fact led a massacre of local Aborigines. This episode then revolves around differing responses to this revelation. Again, the individual episode can be read as a sympathetic portrayal of Aboriginal concerns. Dave demands a monument recognising the Aboriginal dead, and in doing so, he is given lines which sound entirely reasonable — 'If we forget history, we're condemned to relive it'. He is supported by Emma, a central and regular community member: 'Now hang on', she argues in righteous indignation at the suggestion that the Aboriginal massacre should be covered up, 'Are we supposed to hide bits of our history?'.

However, the generic status of this narrative also argues against such sympathetic interpretations. Violet Carnegie, the town busybody (but also deeply loved by all in Cooper's Crossing) is thrown into shock by the fact that her great-great-grandfather was a mass murderer. In fact, the shock is so great that she almost dies. Sam, the blonde-haired blue-eyed all-Australian spunk, very much a central character, makes clear that he blames Dave personally for this danger to the white woman, and angrily demands that Dave withdraw his allegations. Other central members of the community argue that Dave's demands are unreasonable, and a direct threat to the community and its history. Father Jackson, for example, claims that, 'If you don't forget the past, you can't get on with the future'; Vic, a generally likeable character and (as proprietor of the local bar) a structurally central character in this community, similarly argues that this past should be covered up for the good of the town. In such an ambivalent situation, the generic status of the program as a serial seems particularly important in understanding the limits which will be placed on meaning. Dave appears for only a single episode. He is an issue-bearing character. He is not part of the *Flying Doctors*

community, and he brings a direct threat to the integrity of that community. Generically, he is an outsider and a disruptive element. In the space of the serial, his allegations seem open to interpretation less in terms of their necessary truth or untruth, than in relation to their potential damage to the white community.

### B.2.9

Apart from the work involved in constructing understandings of community, another aspect of soap interpretation should be acknowledged. The narratives of soap operas are vast and ongoing. Meanings are always provisional, necessarily temporary. No judgement of a regular character is final, because the next episode may reveal new information.

Similarly, the vast and fragmented nature of soap texts means that characters can well be involved in a range of different activities over a period of time; and knowledges of previous incidents may well inflect readings of other episodes. Mrs Mangle in *Neighbours* may be behaving terribly, but a generically-aware viewer knows just how badly she has been treated by her husband, and may be more inclined to make sympathetic readings of her actions.

An acknowledgement of such generically-precise knowledges, formed over the huge texts that make up the run of a serial, is important when suggesting how Aboriginal characters are open to interpretation in these programs. In feature films and texts which are limited in their representation of Aboriginality, there is a much greater burden of representativeness. Should a character's Aboriginality be the focus of their representation or not? Should characters be, for example, a doctor who 'just happens to be' Aboriginal? Or should the character necessarily become involved in issues of race and race relations? Both possibilities are open to undesired interpretations. As Stephen Muecke summarises the options:

> Let's consider some options for Ernie Dingo as he goes to work for a soap opera like *A Country Practice*...Does he come on as a doctor, without anyone making a fuss about his race? Then we are faced with spectre of *assimilation*.

> Does he come on as a drunk and unemployed? Then we are faced with the
> worse image of a (bad) *stereotype*.  (Muecke, 1992: 12)

But in fact, in a soap opera, the options are not so clear cut.  Any particular
episode does not have to be so representative, because audiences interpret
using knowledges gleaned from episodes taken from across the text of the
series.

The examples of the 'semi-regular' characters of Trevor from *A Country
Practice*, and Dougie from *The Flying Doctors* reinforce this point.  Neither of
these characters is uniquely, or even primarily, signalled as Aboriginal.  In
this, they cannot be accused of 'tokenism' — they are not present only as
bearers of the issue, 'Aboriginality'.  On the other hand, a certain
Aboriginality does form one component of their characters, so that charges of
assimilationism are not easily sustained.

Dougie, for example, is occasionally employed for his tracking skills — when
outsiders get lost in the bush (as they often do).  In the episode 'Cries from the
Heart', for example, he is called upon to do nothing but serve as a black
tracker, co-ordinating the search for a young girl lost in the bush.  Were this a
feature film, it would be easy to dismiss his character as 'stereotyped', serving
the typical role, reinforcing simplistic equations of Aboriginality with
tracking skills.

However, this is not Dougie's only appearance in *The Flying Doctors*: the
character appears in over a dozen stories, and in the course of these he plays
many roles.  In 'A Friend of a Friend', for example, he becomes involved in
the story by giving a lift to a mad whitefella.  Talking to the this man (who
will turn out to be a schizophrenic), Dougie reveals himself to be perfectly
conversant with the trivia of everyday social skills.  He is perceptive (he
knows perfectly well there is a problem with the man: 'He's not the full quid'),
and it is he who uncovers the visitor's condition, discovering the man's
medication and revealing his schizophrenia.  At one point, when the
community is becoming hostile towards the schizophrenic man (some
chickens have been killed and there are rumours the 'madman' is
responsible), Dougie provides a voice of reason: 'Them chickens were killed
by a fox...I found tracks all over the place'.  This is the only point in the

episode where his bush skills are mentioned, and they are mentioned only in passing.

Dougie, then, plays a variety of narrative roles, not all of which are textually linked to his Aboriginality. The case of Ian Watson's Trevor Jackson is similar. The character is initially introduced to *A Country Practice* as a single-story 'issue'-bearing character, in the double episode 'The Dreamkeeper'. Here, he discovers his lost Aboriginal spirituality. However, in Trevor's other stories, his Aboriginality is not always so central. In 'Snakes and Ladders', for example, it is not narratively presented.

One unfortunate aspect of Trevor's character is that he tends to be involved in storylines in a professional capacity. This is not an unusual way of implicating characters in narratives: however, in this case, as Trevor is a park ranger, this leads to his often being seen in natural settings. Despite this setting, any readings of the situation as implying a natural Aboriginal relationship with the environment are complicated, not only by Trevor's self-proclaimed inability to find his away around the bush, but also by his repeatedly manifest proclivity to fall over and injure himself in the park, get bitten by wildlife, come down with allergic rashes to native plants, and so on. In 'Snakes and Ladders', his problem is 'contact dermatitis' from rye grass. 'Never had this back in Sydney', he moans: 'I should have been a banker'. In the same story, Trevor's 'Aunty' Rebecca, who is eleven years old, is suspected lost in the bush. All of the adult characters go out to look for her: there is no suggestion that Trev holds any tracking skills which render him particularly useful in this project.

What the continuing narrative of serials offers is the possibility of adopting both of the aforementioned strategies — to address Aboriginality as a narrative issue, and to accept it as a narrative given — for a single character. If Trevor is involved in a story about his Aboriginality, it does not necessarily imply that he functions differently from other characters simply because he is Aboriginal; viewers familiar with his role will know that in another story, this will not be the case. Similarly, if in one episode Trevor is not referred to as Aboriginal, does not talk about his Aboriginality, and it is not addressed in any way, this need not imply 'the spectre of assimilation': for his Aboriginality has previously been established, and may be addressed again.

The generic limits of serial drama in fact open up the possibilities for interpretation of Aboriginality in particular texts.


**B.2.10**

For Andrew Jakubowicz et al, describing the place of Aborigines in media representations, the indigenous inhabitants of Australia are positioned 'as true-blue Aussies, but as non-Aussies'; as 'in and out of the nation' (Jakubowicz [ed], 1994: 54, 57). Such a description precisely sums up the place of Aborigines in relation to generically-limited interpretations of soap opera representation. If it is accepted that central to the work of understanding soap operas is working through a schema of community, interrogating the position of each character in relation to that fictional group, then the place of Aboriginal characters has been consistently ambivalent. Precisely 'in and out', Aboriginal characters have been, like Wesley Patten in *Home and Away*, present in the narrative, but not in the title sequence. Like Kylie Belling in *The Flying Doctors*, they have been allowed strong friendships, but denied romance. Like Brenda Webb in *Neighbours*, they have been involved in single narratives, and then abruptly removed. Looking at the conceptual schemata which might emerge from a familiarity with the genre of the soap opera it becomes clear that these characters have in fact been involved in unstable and delicately negotiated positions on the very edge of the community. The 'true-blue Aussies' of these fictional communities cannot, it seems, either reject them, or fully accept them. In this, the liminal place of Aboriginal characters in generically-sensitive interpretations of soap operas function in much the same way as the wider discourses detected by Jakubowicz et al.

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1 Ian Craven's analysis (1992) provides an intriguing exception, examining the theoretical possibilities of the soap opera for representations of race; he is not, however, presenting a history of what has actually been made of those possiblities. Apart from this, the most detailed commentary on the subject comes from John Tulloch and Albert

Moran, in their survey of *A Country Practice* (1986). The work of Christine Geraghty on race and soap opera in Britain (1991) cannot be simply transferred to the Australian situation; but certain elements of her analysis will prove useful in this work.

2   Work on soap operas has consistently addressed audience use (Dyer [ed], 1981; Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987); but this tends to result in an ethnographic focus at the expense of textual considerations.

# Chapter B.3: Director

## B.3.1

The name of an author, publicly circulated, enables audiences to make sense
of a text in particular ways, interpreting it in relation to a set of others — an
oeuvre — which are sanctioned as relevant in the work of producing
meaning.

It is no longer necessary to see the interpretations which are made through
such intertexts as ontological in status: whether guaranteed by the name of
the author, or by wider 'structural' forces. However, at the same time, the
death of the author has been greatly exaggerated. The 'author function'
(Foucault, 1984: 107) may be a fiction, but it is a 'necessary fiction' (Marshall,
1991: 86). This chapter examines the way in which discourses of authorship
can function as important means of setting horizons on interpretations of
Aboriginal representations.

## B.3.2

Tracey Moffatt is an Australian Aboriginal photographer and film-maker.
Having moved from short documentary films to feature production (*Bedevil*,
1993), her latest work is a 'film clip' (music video) for the INXS song 'The
Messenger'. This piece was commissioned as part of a '$500,000 marketing
strategy' for the 1993 INXS album, *Full Moon, Dirty Hearts*. (Knapp, 1993: 14).
A clip was commissioned for each of the twelve songs. These were to be
directed by nine Australian film-makers; who were to be: 'people who haven't
been spoiled by music videos' (Knapp, 1993: 14). The music videos produced
were then explicitly marketed as the products of the cross-fertilisation of
various branches of the Australian media industry.

The film clip for 'The Messenger' features Aboriginal women in the role of bad Black sistas.  As is common for music videos, the text consists of a combination of fast-cutting and striking images, with an underlying narrative thrust (the narrative constructed in this piece is in fact more prominent than is the case in many videos).  There is no intercut concert or studio footage of the band to interrupt the diegesis, and most elements are eventually recoverable into a single coherent narrative, despite the structural complexity.

The film-clip opens with a silhouette of an Aboriginal woman on a skyline, against the orange sky of a sunset.  The image is a recognisable one: it has been labelled the 'noble savage' silhouette.  This shot is held silent and still for a moment, until the music starts and the figure suddenly begins to dance sexily; in moving its arms, it also becomes obvious that it is carrying a gun.

The next images are of Black women (their Aboriginality is a point for discussion, as noted below).  Dressed as sexy combat troops, in a way that recalls American blaxploitation films of the 1970's (Cripps, 1978), the first shots of these woman are fragmented glimpses of their thighs, their legs, their buttocks.  Their Afro shock-wigs, huge gold hoop earrings and gaudy make-up signal, and perhaps undercut, the representation of blackness as exploited image.

The next important stage in the clip is the appearance of a subtitle — 'Hideout' — over an image of an inner city building.  One of the most unusual aspects of this clip is the use of sub/titles throughout to construct a narrative space quite distinct from that performance space where the band continues to sing.  The lettering used is fluorescent and the font is vaguely 1960's.  As the next headline, 'Kidnap', flashes up, this is indeed what happens — the women are in the band's white limousine, threatening the boys with brightly coloured plastic guns.

A newspaper headline spins into view — 'The baddest chick hit squad that ever hit town', Michael Hutchence (lead singer and main focus of the Aboriginal women's attention throughout the video) is pushed to his knees and manhandled.  As the group of women thrust him about, his shirt is pulled down around his shoulders.  The words of the song have been playing since the start of the video, but it is not until this point that Hutchence 'sings'

(lip-synchs) some of these words in the diegetic narrative — 'Your moment is coming'. These are the first words of the song itself to which any attention is given or drawn by the video.

A series of captions move the narrative forward. With 'Captive', Hutchence is tied to a chair; 'Mama Boss' presents a very low angle shot of a black woman. She also wears the blaxploitation uniform — combat shorts, fright wig, earrings and makeup — as well as dark glasses and a thick cigar. The band is forced to pull white hoods over their heads: 'We've got them'. One band member sticks his hooded head out of the limousine sun roof — 'Help Help...' (this is the first spoken word attributed to the band in the subtitles). A Black woman continues to shake Hutchence, still tied to the chair. He looks to camera, and his facial expression suggests fear. The next newspaper headline states: 'Band missing. Sista X, the meanest mother of them all'. The captions that follow are: 'Successful mission' (over shots of a burning building); 'Goody Goody' (a Black woman watches the burning on a television set, and has her face up against the screen); 'Torture chamber' (Hutchence writhes in his chair as several black women grab him and tie him up. In the absence of a close-up of his face, it is uncertain whether this in pleasure of pain. As he looks to camera in a later close-up, his face is excited and wild); 'Paint his nails' (they do so, in a close-up of Hutchence's hand).

With the next segment, 'Training video', a different discourse is introduced. This set of images, distributed throughout the second half of the video, are marked as distinct by the caption 'Training video', writing on the screen suggesting the presence of the Camcorder which took the images ('Rec.' in red writing in one corner of the screen); the use of video rather than film; acknowledgement of the camera by participants, and so on. The first of these segments shows Black women running around the bush waving their plastic guns. Intercut with the conclusion of the main narrative, clips of this 'Training video' show the women chasing a fat white man, running in the bush; a woman pointing a stick to a blackboard, on which is written 'Molotov cocktail', as she and her audience of black women perform a raised-fist salute; two black women find a white tramp; one puts her gun in his mouth; a group of Aboriginal women doing karate moves, following an Asian woman; and over a medium shot of the Asian woman who has been shown performing martial arts moves, a caption appears, 'Kung Fu Doll'.

The main narrative continues to the end of the clip, with a similar combination of captions and images. 'Private Boom Boom' appears over a shot of a Black woman at a table, building a bomb or similar piece of machinery; 'I'm yours baby', shows an Aboriginal woman in a locker room (the torture chamber?), smashing a chain against the wall; 'INXS in hoods', over the whole band arrives at the hideout (previously only Hutchence was at this location); 'Ouch', as a white man is thrown against a wall; 'Whoa!' spins onto the screen as the 'kung-fu doll' performs a judo throw on a white man. The shot and word are repeated, and she then kicks him in the face, and 'Ow!' appears on the screen just as Hutchence makes an 'Ow!' (Michael-Jackson-style) noise in the song.

The images continue with an Aboriginal woman polishing her plastic gun; 'Kung Fu Doll' punches a punch bag; an Aboriginal woman pulling the head off a white baby doll; another, legs splayed, stroking her thigh. 'Hello boys...' appears as a caption, and Sista X begins to remove her shirt, revealing slinky black underwear. Hutchence stares up at her, with a look of expectation. 'Sista X! Sista X!' says the caption, and the image shows Hutchence chained up by his wrists, again mouthing words from his song: 'Your time is coming!'. The next caption is 'Free INXS', as spotlights play over the outside of the building, and women wave their guns, sprawl to the floor on top of the boys. They shoot out of the windows, and the Kung Fu Doll cartwheels across the room. One Aboriginal woman outside the hide-out is caught in a spotlight, impotently 'shooting' her plastic toy gun. With the caption 'Escape at dawn', the INXS boys climb down a wall. The women — Aboriginal and Kung Fu — get onto a boat. INXS and two policemen stand on the quayside, leaning out towards the water, beckoning with their arms: the caption says, 'Come back we love you'.

'Ooh baby', and the Aboriginal group sail off on the boat, waving their arms triumphantly; the next caption is 'I'm in love': accompanied by a close-up of Hutchence. The video ends by intercutting the women dancing on the boat with the boys leaning over the water, beckoning for them to come back. The final shot is a freeze frame of Hutchence swooning, with the title 'Sigh'.

**B.3.3**

Critical writing on authorship employs quite particular terminology to discuss the work of 'marginalised' producers. While in discussions about the work of 'dominant' artists (those whose social identities, whether as masculine, white or heterosexual, for example, can be considered dominant), ideas of authorship historically worked to form exclusive understandings of 'art', authorship in relation to 'marginal' producers (women, queers, members of subaltern racial groups) has rather been concerned with producing politically enabling discussions of agency. Andy Medhurst, formulates this need for a political 'double standard' by suggesting that (in relation to a gay cinema): 'Authorship [is] bad, Gay Authorship [is] good' (Medhurst, 1991: 198). Reading a film through the point of fixity supplied by the notional 'auteur': 'has more political justification if the project being undertaken is one concerned with the cultural history of a marginalized group' (Medhurst, 1991: 203). Similarly, Kobena Mercer argues that:

> ...[a]lthough Romantic notions of authorial creativity cannot be returned to the central role they once played in criticism and interpretation, the question of agency in cultural practices that contest the canon and its cultural dominance suggests that it really does matter *who* is speaking (Mercer, 1991: 181).

This move to re-inscribe the author can be seen as a gambit in a continuing series of uneasy negotiations in cultural studies between the postmodern, and those movements, such as post-colonialism, which have been read as offering more potential for political effectivity[1]. Such debates are based upon a perceived sense of postmodernity's disempowering *differance*: the supposed apathy implied in accepting the fictional nature of many political metanarratives. The negotiation between the poles of (for example) postmodernism and post-colonialism often results in an acceptance that to acknowledge a narrative as fictional is not to render it any less potent. Thus, terms such as Gayatri Spivak's 'operational essentialism', Michel Foucault's 'reverse inscription', or Stuart Marshall's 'necessary fictions' suggest the need to retain the use of terms while never over-burdening them with the need to represent Truth (McKee 1993: 90). As Stuart Hall formulates this position:

> ...if signification depends upon the endless repositioning of its differential
> terms, meaning, in any specific instance, depends on the contingent and
> arbitrary stop — the necessary and temporary 'break' in the infinite semiosis
> of language. This does not detract from the original insight. It only threatens
> to do so if we mistake this 'cut' of identity — this positioning, which makes
> meaning possible — as a natural and permanent, rather than an arbitrary and
> contingent 'ending'... (Hall, 1990: 230)

The fiction of authorship, then, may prove to be an important one for work
which is concerned to understand the meanings available in relation to texts
produced by Aboriginal film-makers. The concerns of postcolonial and
subaltern theories are closely connected to the question of authorship; of who
is allowed to speak, but more important, who is seen to speak; who is
perceived as author of a discourse (Spivak and Gunew, 1990: 59). As Linda
Alcoff writes this: 'a speaker's location (...*social* location or social identity) has
an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims' (Alcoff, 1991-92:
7).

It is with these points in mind that the importance of authorship for
representations of Aboriginal Australians can be explored. As suggested
above, the specific case of Tracey Moffatt's film clip for 'The Messenger' can
be used to understand why it might prove necessary to read the video as part
of Moffatt's oeuvre — even while bearing in mind the artificial nature of the
processes which make such an interpretation possible. Mercer suggests that
'the death of the author in our [Black male] case makes a difference to the
kinds of readings we make' (Mercer, 1991, 182). In addressing possible
interpretations of 'The Messenger', this argument is clearly illustrated.


## B.3.4

The project of discussing authorship in relation to Aboriginal cultural
production brings with it specific theoretical difficulties. As several authors
have pointed out: 'Aboriginal art does not emphasise original, creative
individuals or assign them responsibility as author' (Langton, 1993: 66). In
common with other primarily oral cultures, it appears that stories are not
prized for originality; the guardian of a particular Dreaming narrative is not

required to exhibit creativity[2]. This has implications for discussing an Aboriginal authorship; and certainly, the concept should not be fêted as a suitable one for empowering all Aboriginal production in filmic and televisual media. In the work of Ernabella television, for example, to invoke discourses of individual creativity and associated authorship would be unfair to the material produced, and to the context of its production. In the case of such material, produced by Aboriginal groups for consumption by Aboriginal groups, other discursive modes may prove more useful.

However, with reference to the work of Tracey Moffatt, the concept of authorship seems an immediately relevant one. Marcia Langton notes that: '[p]roductions authored by individuals are to some extent typical of Aboriginal people in settled Australia' (Langton, 1993: 14); and this is certainly the case in relation to Tracey Moffatt. When her work circulates in precisely those institutional (art-house) circumstances which have proven so conducive to the growth of auteurism, an attempt to apply the terms of authorship to her work does not seem forced. Moffatt's film career has traversed a variety of institutional arenas. Early work was commissioned by the Aboriginal Medical Service (*Spread the Word*, a culturally appropriate AIDS education video) and by an Aboriginal and Islander dance company (*Watch Out*). These early videos were not initially broadcast on mainstream television, but circulated within specific networks: health groups, Aboriginal communities and so on.

Later work , while not actually commissioned by Aboriginal groups, still addresses itself to specifically Aboriginal issues, and focuses on Aboriginal characters. Made without the explicit educational purpose of her earlier works, Moffatt's short films *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Night Cries* began to circulate in different ways. They have been shown in art cinemas, and taken up as valid objects of study — academically (Jennings and Hollinsworth, 1988), or as art (Rutherford, 1990). As Moffatt became known as a named director, it was also possible for her earlier work to be redefined, as suitable for consumption as 'art': her community education videos, for example, could thus be shown as part of an authored season at the Australian Film Institute cinema (Langton, 1993: 16). Moffatt has emerged from this history very much as a 'named' author for these texts, which become her oeuvre. The most visible elements of the Moffatt canon are *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), *Night*

*Cries* (1990) and *Bedevil* (1993); in short, those texts which have been validated as 'art'. Moffatt is known as precisely the sort of artist whose work should be read in terms of creative authorship:

> Tracey Moffatt enthusiastically recounts a scene from the last film she saw. No, it wasn't some impeccable restrained offering by the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. Nor was it an enigmatic, art-house piece by Nicholas Roeg. Although both are influences. We're talking about the extremely mainstream *Money Pit*...The director of *BeDevil* — a trilogy of ghost stories selected for the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes this year — is full of surprises...(Roach, 1993; see also Rutherford, 1990: 146)

In the invocation of these *auteurs* as suitable points of comparison, Moffatt is constructed as a typical creative author of art works. Through this process of invention as an filmic artist, Moffatt has become recognisable in Australia as probably the most visible Aboriginal film director [3]. Her perceived importance in this area can be seen in the fact that two major studies of Aboriginality and film use photographs from Moffatt's work as cover images[4].

This status as author has allowed for interpretations to be made across Moffatt's oeuvre: for example, one reviewer of *Bedevil* writes in these terms:

> Using the formal studio settings she explored to such effect in *Night Cries,* as well as the humorous documentary style of *Nice Coloured Girls*, Moffatt has crafted an unsettling work that oscillates between the stylised and the unexpected (Verhoeven, 1993a: 9).

In such ways, interpretations made of this film work with a publicly circulated oeuvre, whose intertextual presence suggests a schema to limit the making of meaning.


## B.3.5

As well as limiting an oeuvre, the writing of authorship can also involve the invocation of biography as a validating contextual discourse for the production of interpretations. In this context, it is important not only that

Tracey Moffatt is Aboriginal; but that her Aboriginality is public currency. A schema working from the texts of her oeuvre would probably find race in Australia to be a central aspect of interpretations of her work; but those secondary texts which contribute to the author-schema work to ensure that this is indeed the case. Moffatt is an: 'Aboriginal film producer and photographer' (Higgins, 1987); 'Aboriginal photographer' (McDonald, 1989); 'Aboriginal film-maker' (Willcox, 1988). Although understandably reluctant to close down the meanings of her work so severely ('*Bedevil* I would not like to be categorised as an Aboriginal film, it's about other things as well. There's white Australians, Greeks, Chinese' [Moffatt, in Staines, 1993a: 12]), the director does not publicly distance her work from her Aboriginality. Moffatt refers to herself in interviews as an 'Aboriginal' or a 'black film-maker' (Rutherford, 1988: 148; Brady, 1988: 1).

**B.3.6**

As a music video, 'The Messenger' has not been over-inscribed with learned meaning as have Moffatt's more 'respectable' works. Little has been written on the clip, and few attempts made to return it to an oeuvre[5]. Any account of the meanings which might be made from the Aboriginality in this text must be sensitive to the particular instance of its distribution: film clips circulate in a manner quite distinct from that of Moffatt's previous work. Unlike the Aboriginal community videos, the clip is not distributed as a work authored by an Aboriginal artist. Unlike the 'art' films, it comes with no name or catalogue to aid construction of an author's personality. In terms of traditional authorship, music videos are among the most anonymous forms of audio-visual production. Moffatt's name is not textually present in the film clip.

How important is such an absence? In order to address this question, it is possible to produce a series of interpretations which might become available if different conceptual schemata are brought to bear upon the text. For in fact, music videos, although largely not known by directors, are highly-authored texts. If 'The Messenger' is not a Tracey Moffatt production, then it must be an INXS video. To the extent to which the director is effaced as author, INXS

are given the space to claim that central position more securely for themselves. The erasure of 'Tracey Moffatt' from the process of meaning-making leaves 'INXS' to stand more securely in this position as the guarantors of the correct reading of the this video. To make this point is merely to confirm the obvious truth that within the contemporary popular music industry, the idea of the romantic, individualised creative genius is used to authorise the singers as the masters of their oeuvre[6]. Song writers are similarly less commonly acknowledged (such generalisations of course ignore the multiplicity of competing discourses that make up such a vast arena as writing on popular music — from *Smash Hits* to *Oyster*). It is in this context — where authorship is not simply present, but must be carefully negotiated — that the importance of Tracey Moffatt as 'Aboriginal film-maker' becomes apparent. If Moffatt is not allowed a position as 'author' of this video, the text is open to a wider variety of readings — and, in this example, to quite unattractive interpretations.

An interpretation of the text which pays no heed to the status of Moffatt as author of this work could be constructed as follows. It is apparent that the women in this piece are aggressively sexual, powerful, in control of the narrative and so on: but they are simultaneously constructed as explicit objects of fantasy (for INXS generally, and for Hutchence in particular). Centring around the fact of the music — this is an INXS song, it is INXS who are singing — such a reading could cede agency to Hutchence, as the only character in the film clip who is seen to speak or sing, and thus the only one who has vocal control. It is obvious, then, that the women in the clip are using their sexuality in a powerful and aggressive way, intimidating the band with their knowing display — but in this reading, they are still on display. When Sista X removes her top to reveal a lacy black bra, it is on view, and available for lustful consumption by heterosexual males. And in the scene where she menaces Hutchence with her brassiere, as at other points in the video, it is noticeable that the singer's performance is not one of a cowed male, terrified by the display of feminine sexuality (there is only one shot in the entire piece where he actually looks scared). Most of the time, he is actively smiling as he is 'tortured' (tied down by the women). His physical performance is in fact quite controlled (as he is slapped around by the women, he does not limply fall under their blows: rather, he is strong and

physically confident, rolling with the slaps and never losing control over his body).  His body language, read in conjunction with his facial expression suggests that he is enjoying, indeed is in control of, the situation.  This idea is reinforced when he looks to the camera and sings.  Taking up a privileged position, with an awareness of the non-diegetic spectating position, he is marked as privileged subject.  By contrast, the women are objects, oblivious of both the camera, and of the song that Hutchence sings; the song in which they play only a part.

Another important component of a reading suggesting INXS' position of control is the parodic nature of the video, signalled from the opening shot of the Aboriginal 'noble savage'.  Such a recognisable trope from the history of Aboriginal representation is quickly transformed into parody through a trendy and confident dance movement, and the presence of a gun.  Similarly, the nature of the Black activists is explicitly parodic: their costumes, make up and language suggest this.  In comparison, the band are simply the band: INXS.  They do not exist in this explicitly ambiguous way.  As a specific example of the way in which this parody affects readings of the women, consider their weapons.  As phallic Mothers, they carry guns, which are used in a variety of threatening ways (forced into the mouth of a [white, male] tramp, for example).  But how threatening can anyone be when her gun is made from pink plastic?  The very parody involved here can all too easily be read as a form of disavowal: precisely the kind of image that a threatened masculine sexuality might produce in order to mock the idea of a powerful femininity.  The women are indeed aggressive: but the parodic nature of their roles opens possibilities of readings that would find that power laughable.

The end of the video can easily be read to support the idea of INXS in command.  The woman have kidnapped and tortured the boys: but the effect they have had is not to create fear.  Rather the video ends with INXS in a swoon ('Sigh!').  This does not convey fear; as it is performed, it is more reminiscent of teenage infatuation.  As the women sail off, their escape is intercut with repeated shots of the band leaning over the water shouting 'We love you!', and laughing.  Again, here the band's performance helps to suggest that they are in control.  As singers rather than actors, they tend to slip out of even the most simple performance of emotion (fear, for example, in the 'kidnapping' scene in the back of the limousine), to laugh or look askew at

what is happening. In doing so, they are allowed to step outside of the narrative, to comment on what is happening: while the actors who play the Aboriginal activists (including Kristina Nehm, heroine of *The Fringe Dwellers*) are caught within the diegesis, unable to look out.

## B.3.7

Such a reading can be made if Tracey Moffatt is not visible as an author of this text. If, however, Moffatt is present, is acknowledged as the agency, the creative persona behind the work — and thus the source of meaning in the video — then quite other interpretations of 'The Messenger' start to emerge.

Once again, it is necessary to emphasise that any project accepting David Bordwell's desire for a 'historical poetics' will be concerned with the historical status of discourses. To present Tracey Moffatt as an authoring presence, and her work as a suitable oeuvre for the formation of a conceptual schema in relation to 'The Messenger', is not to act wilfully. As noted above, Moffatt's status as just such an author is a publicly-available one. Attempts to read this film-clip as part of her oeuvre are not an originary theoretical exercise, but rather an attempt to account for interpretations which might well become available were this film-clip to be circulated as Moffatt's work.

It is necessary to insist that there is no intention to suggest that there is a single reading which can be identified as the 'Moffatt' reading of 'The Messenger'. Importantly, the name of the author, 'Tracey Moffatt', is not a stable, finite quantity. This is obviously true of all authorial names (INXS, for example), but the case of Moffatt is particularly interesting. Because, as suggested earlier, Moffatt's work has occupied several discursive and institutional arenas, there exists a series of complex Moffatt-names, each implying a distinct oeuvre: there is Moffatt-artist, for example; there is Moffatt-community film-maker, and so on. Although accepting these different oeuvres and names, it is once again useful to accept, and to promote, a working fiction. If we speak as though 'Tracey Moffatt' is a meaningful term, one which carries the potential to stabilise meaning, it may indeed prove to be so. This chapter again limits itself: here to understanding the

ways in which the mobilisation of one 'Tracey Moffatt' may serve to promote feminist and 'Aboriginal' readings of 'The Messenger'.

An interpretive schema which enables interpretations of 'The Messenger' to be made in reference to Moffatt's oeuvre must find the earlier film, *Nice Coloured Girls*, to be directly relevant.

> *Nice Coloured Girls* is an account of three young Aboriginal women 'cruising' the Cross for a night of diversion at the expense of a boorish and predatory white man. They lead their 'Captain' through their regular round of expensive haunts, encouraging his incapacitating drinking, and extracting the maximum return in drinks, food and fun. The climax to their evening comes when they 'roll' him and make a triumphant getaway in a cab with his wallet. As the subtitle concludes, "It has usually been a good night."
> (Jennings and Hollinsworth, 1988: 129)

*Nice Coloured Girls* also addresses the question of whether the use of feminine sexuality to fleece a man involves the adoption of a dominant or a subservient position. In the case of this text, the situation seems to be unambiguous. The captain is an unsympathetic figure, as Jennings and Hollinsworth say, 'brash and predatory'. The question of who is in control narratively and visually is also less uncertain: the women escape at the end of the night, happy, richer and successful. The captain is left drunk, robbed, defeated, and more importantly, in full knowledge of his defeat. There is very little in the way of sexual pleasure offered to the viewer: the girls are not dressed to reveal their legs, for example, as are the black sisters in "The Messenger' : certainly, none of them removes her shirt to reveal a lacy black bra, as Sista X does in the video. Less space is opened for the pleasure of a potential male (white or black) spectator than is the case in the film clip. Also importantly, *Nice Coloured Girls* makes explicit the imbrication of race and gender in the history of Australia. A voice over at the start of the film reads a passage from a 1788 journal which makes explicit the sailor's perception of Aboriginal women as equivalent to 'a Covent Garden strumpet'. Shots set in the past suggest a continuity between what happens in the modern bar, and the sexual relationship between early colonists and Aboriginal women. The colonial history of Australia has been one of power played out in terms of race and

gender: not as a pair of disconnected terms, but as intimately linked terms in the same equation:

> ...one way [the Aboriginal women] can gain and keep...control is through their attractiveness to white men; they can use the very qualities that first lead white men to abuse their mothers, against the descendants of those men (Kaplan, 1989: 15).

Readings which have been made of Moffatt's earlier work assert that her films are involved in a process of rewriting the history of this race/gender relation in terms of Aboriginal women's awareness and empowerment. The Aboriginal woman has 'been the exotic object of curiosity and desire...and she has learnt her dual role of survival within the colonial power structure. She has learned to play the shy maid and the wanton strumpet' (Jennings and Hollinsworth, 1988: 132). In short, Nice Coloured Girls is:

> ...a celebration of the perceptiveness, ingenuity, skills and sexual power of Aboriginal women in white Australia...the extent to which these women have sought to combat their oppression and to maximise their advantage and control (Jennings and Hollinsworth, 1988: 129; see also Rutherford, 1988: 147; and Kaplan, 1989: 15)

If an intertext of such a 'Moffatt' is brought to bear in reading 'The Messenger', it seems likely that readings might favour the Aboriginal women as dominant. If the video were to be shown as part of an oeuvre with Nice Coloured Girls, this would promote very different readings of the video to a screening on MTV sandwiched between videos for Prince and Shabba Ranks.

If Moodeitj Yorgas were also to be presented as an intertext, a tendency to readings in terms of women's dominance would be strengthened. As the subtitle for this work — Strong Women — makes clear, it is a piece which presents, through interviews, images of women in control: of themselves, their lives, institutional situations, law practices, and so on. While the use of sexuality is not discussed, the video's potency as an intertext is obvious.

Reading the film clip through what is known of 'Moffatt' promotes the idea that it is the sistas of 'The Messenger' who are in control. After all, it is an Aboriginal woman who is in control of the video (as director). Placing this

figure at the centre of readings of 'he clip allows for a more hopeful discussion of the relationship between gender and race in 'The Messenger'

On the one hand, race might actually be downplayed. As suggested above, there is no single, stable persona available for distribution as the author function. There is also another Tracey Moffatt, another author-function, which might provide an interpretive centre for the text: 'Hitting the headlines is lesbian film-maker Tracey Moffatt. She talks to Deborah Staines about her new movie...' (Staines, 1993:12). For those who read 'The Messenger' as a work of a lesbian film-maker, the racial aspect may prove secondary. The women can be read as dominant primarily in sexual terms, and only racially powerful in a subsidiary sense, if at all. Indeed, interpretations of Moffatt from a feminist perspective, with little concern for race, may be not only possible, but dominant in some situations. Jennifer Stott, writing from an intercontinental perspective, believes that:

> I think you would find that most Americans read *Night Cries* for its formal
> qualities and its psychoanalytic dimensions [that is, dealing with gender]
> rather than its analysis of Australian Aborigines... (Stott, 1995: 76)

This might be one 'Moffatt' reading of the relationship between gender and race. However, invoking an oeuvre including *Nice Coloured Girls* involves asserting that the sexuality of Aboriginal women cannot be read separate from a history of racial oppression. The two are linked, and have been linked, in the interactions between the colonisers and the indigenes, since the first landings. By calling on this 'Moffatt', race is re-inscribed into the gender relations which seem to form the most obvious axis of power in the video.

Further, Moffatt's presence stabilises meaning in the video in another very important way. It is not at all obvious from watching the video that the women are in fact Aboriginal Australians. The iconography of blaxploitation and Black power are recognisably American: they do not correspond with familiar images of Australian Aboriginal people. Whether this is simply because Aboriginal women have not been seen in so-called 'Afro' hairdos before, or if it is more insidiously true that they have rarely been seen in such positions of power, the image of these women does not immediately suggest Australian Aboriginality. Reading in terms of Moffatt, then, where such an

Aboriginality forms a known part of the author-function (every work in her oeuvre has centred on Aboriginal women), the characters become more recognisable. In addition, a specific meaning regarding the generalisability of identity is suggested. How acceptable is it to provide a 'Black' identity that spans Aboriginal Australian and Afro-Caribbean populations who have little in common beyond skin colour? In providing a linkage to black American radical movements — in an image of Aboriginal Australians taking up those political attitudes previously associated more with American blacks — the video could be interpreted as questioning the suitability of such a transfer. Moffatt's Aboriginal presence stops the women in the text from merely being 'Black', and allows for questions of different kinds of blackness Seeing an Aboriginal women, outrageously dressed, pointing to a figure of a Molotov cocktail on a blackboard is (at the very least) suggestive.

## B.3.8

Stabilised by Moffatt, then, the basis of a favourable reading could be that when the Aboriginal sistas display themselves sexually to the band, the men's undeniable pleasure at this does not in itself invalidate the women's actions. Indeed, as *Nice Coloured Girls* suggests, such pleasure is in fact a measure of their success. What makes the case of 'The Messenger' more ambiguous than that of the Moffatt's earlier work is that in the previous film, the women have a definite goal (monetary gain); upon achieving this, they dump the captain, making him aware of their power. In the music clip, the black sistas have no such explicit agenda. At one point, it seems that Sista X is only interested in taking sexual pleasure from Mick Hutchence; at another, they wish to humiliate him ('Paint his nails!'). The clips from the training video suggest a paramilitary operation, but little of its intentions. Shots of Aboriginal women expressing aggression towards whites (pushing a gun into the mouth of white male tramp; pulling the head off a white baby doll) although implying a theme of Black power, do not define the women's specific aims in capturing the band. The video's ambiguity is reinforced by the fact that the narrative does not firmly establish which group has more convincingly achieved their goals. The Aboriginal women are chased away by the police, but escape easily on their prepared boat. They do not seem particularly dismayed. They

stride around the deck, shaking their fists. By contrast, the final shots of the band show them impotent, backed by two powerless police officers, waving their hands.

In short, the video finishes with the Aboriginal women leaving the band in love with them. This is communicated explicitly in a visual discourse, the subtitles ('I'm in love'). If they had intended to hold the band to ransom, this would be a failure. On a more relevant level, if they had intended to make the band scared of them, or to have destroyed the men with their sexuality, they would again have failed. They have, after all, become figures for INXS' fantasy by the end of the video.

However, if their goal was to make the band fall in love with them, they have succeeded — and *Nice Coloured Girls* suggests that this is in fact a very powerful position to be in. The Aboriginal women do not seem annoyed or upset that INXS are in love with them — and why should they be? It is precisely through playing out this role of 'wanton strumpets' that they control white men most effectively. Through an understanding of the video as controlled by an author who is very aware of these facts, it is reasonable to make a reading of this text in which the women are self-consciously playing out the role of fantasy dominatrix: a self-consciousness which the parodic nature of the video only makes increasingly visible — in order to control, and to use, INXS. The love is clearly unrequited. Hutchence is so powerless that all he can do is fall over limply ('Sigh'). The video thus ends with the women very much in the dominant position.

Indeed, there is a very attractive self-reflexive reading to be made around Tracey Moffatt's own nature as a wanton strumpet. By playing within the rules of the game, Moffatt makes a video which seems to play up to INXS. They are tortured by their fantasy figures, and seen to enjoy it. But if INXS are understood as 'captains', the scenario can be reversed. Moffatt is really in control — she is the director of the video, after all. While the women in *Nice Coloured Girls* take the captain for all he has to offer — a wallet full of money — Moffatt, by similarly playing with the role of female Aboriginal sexuality, gets from INXS the funding and the opportunity to make a music video. INXS are the captains who may not be fleeced textually, but have been so in

the very industrial process of making the video. Moffatt is a *Nice Coloured Girl*, and this is the message of her 'Messenger'.

### B.3.9

These, then, are the horizons of interpretation which might come into play in the reading of this video, firstly if INXS, and then if Tracey Moffatt, were understood to be authors of the piece. It is useful to look in more detail at the circulation of the text, and to suggest the particular ways in which each of these interpretations might be favoured.

As suggested above, 'The Messenger' video was produced as part of widely-hyped media package for the release of INXS' album *Full Moon, Dirty Hearts*. Several young Australian film directors were invited to provide film-clips; one was produced for each song. The resulting collection was broadcast on national television as an 'INXS special'. This context suggests the way in which a particularly visible set of authorship discourses have been circulated around this video.

The authorship of well-known young Australian film directors for these clips was a particular point of the marketing gimmick of this project (Knapp, 1993). In order to project this, the directors names were widely circulated in publicity materials surrounding the launch of the album and the special program. It is possible to argue, then, that Tracey Moffatt's name was publicly available as author of 'The Messenger' in a much more visible way than is generally the case for the makers of film clips. However, the nature of this project as an 'INXS Special' simultaneously works to insist on an authorship for the band. The program includes, as well as music videos for all of the songs on *Full Moon, Dirty Hearts*, interviews with members of the band. These are intercut to give a running commentary on each song. Such an associated text offers an explicit interpretive framework for the reading of these film clips: including 'The Messenger'. Indeed, in the program that is the 'INXS Special', these interviews and Tracey Moffatt's film clip are in fact part of the same text, and thus immediately relevant to the work of interpretation. Industrial discourses suggest that the film clips for these songs are not to be circulated as discrete entities in a way that is typical of the form; rather, they

are designed to be explicitly authored by INXS (the executive producer of the *Full Moon, Dirty Hearts* project, Julia Stone, states that 'the clips which make up this special are not to be used singularly...We don't feel it's fair to use them that way'; Knapp, 1993: 14).

In such a context, the band's comments before the clip is played stand as an authorising discourse which will be insistently associated with — indeed, part of the text of — the clip itself. The band's comments are intercut with all of the videos in the program — and in several cases explicitly address the question, 'What is this song about?'. The clips used to introduce the song 'The Gift', for example, feature a band member uttering the following profundity: 'I think 'The Gift' is really a song about — where are we all going? Appealing to people's imaginations and asking them to question things'. In such a context, readings made of the subsequent video are likely to be rather more intent on finding profound meaning than might otherwise be the case.

By comparison, the comments which precede 'The Messenger' are less prescriptive. One band member says, "The Messenger' is really a song about...' He is cut off: a common feature of the editing in these soundbites. Another member takes over: 'We both probably got drunk and worked on the song under those circumstances'. Similarly banal is: 'It was meant to be fun...[it] has a kind of looseness'. While these comments do not set out to guide the process of meaning-making in as explicit a way as those which introduce 'The Gift', they are prescriptive of the way in which the song and the video should be read. 'Fun' and 'a kind of looseness', that is, do not suggest a song with an explicitly political content. In their banality, these comments do not promote a reading which would focus on the problematic nature of Aboriginal or female involvement in the production of the images that follow. 'Fun' does not suggest that the parodic feminine sexuality in the video, which could potentially destabilise the band's position of cheerful control, is in fact very threatening. If it is 'fun', it is more likely to be under the control of the band who make this assertion: it is entertainment; it is enjoyable: there is little chance of a message being perceived as a valid part of the song's meaning.

**B.3.10**

Another aspect of the readings available in this text, one which links authorship to concerns which have gone before, is the way in which this song and video present quite distinct director's and band's discourses: and align these explicitly with different methods of conveying information. The words of the band are sung; while the words of Tracey Moffatt are written on the screen. The band may be seen as the authors of the words they sing; but the director of the clip is more easily seen as the author of the text which flashes up on the screen ('Goody Goody'). The relative importance accorded to each element — the aural component of the song, the visual component of the video — will suggest hierarchies of importance for the relative authors.

The medium of distribution will, following the arguments in Part A, necessarily be relevant at this point. Consideration of television as a medium would suggest that the visual component of a broadcast programme is less important than the aural. As a generalisation about the form, this may well be true. However, music videos circulate in very specific ways. Ironically, they are one form of television which is sometimes presented purely as image without sound: in public spaces such as bars and nightclubs it is not unusual to see film clips used in this way. If the regimes of spectatorship in such areas present only the film clip, and no sound, then Tracey Moffatt's visible discourse, still written on the screen, remains available in a way that is not true of the words INXS sing. In such a situation, hierarchies of authorship may well offer Tracey Moffatt as a privileged author of the piece.

More specific cultural expectations about the reception of video clips are also pertinent at this point. Do viewers give more attention to the aural or visual components of these texts? It might seem that, with the song historically preceding the clip, and the latter explicitly constructed only for the purpose of selling the former, that the song will necessarily be privileged. However, this is not always the case. It may be that viewers pay less attention to the song — and certainly to the lyrics of the song — than they do to the visual material of the film clip. Perhaps surprisingly, the writing, performance and circulation of modern popular music places surprisingly little stress on the words (and with this, any understood 'meaning') of a song. Exceptions such as the promotion of Bono as a serious and self-conscious song-writer draw attention

to the phenomenon by their scarcity. It is not important in much popular music to be able to understand the lyrics. They are not sung to be audible: when deciphered, they are often banal, lacking coherence or purpose. In the case of *Full Moon, Dirty Hearts*, most of the lyrics on the album are impossible to make out without intensive effort and repeated listenings. The only words which stand out clearly, as is the case with much music, are those of the chorus. It is with these, and with a title, that many popular songs differentiate themselves. The marker of difference here is 'Don't you put the blame on the messenger!': as with 'This time I know it's for real', or 'I'm guilty of love in the first degree', the catchphrase line is the only series of words on the record which need be distinguishable. And even these need not be interpretable: it is less important that the catchphrase be meaningful than that it is memorable: often the use of a cliché proves useful in providing an easily recognised tag, one that will lodge a song's distinct identity. Such a refusal of the necessity of interpretation in song lyrics is one factor working to deny INXS control of meanings in the video.

It is true that the song will still have a potency in defining acceptable parameters for reading. Non-lyrical elements such as the pace, the types of instruments used, the melody, major or minor key, the performance style of the vocalist — all of these will communicate information about the subject of the song. However, semiotically, music is a relatively crude and imprecise means of conveying detailed information. A series of simple statements can be drawn from the factors detailed above — as a song in a major key, it is likely to be more upbeat or cheerful; 4 beats, strongly accented on the first and third produces, in conjunction with the rapid pace, an aggressive, pushing atmosphere; and so on. However, the semiotic function of music seems to be more diffuse, a less simple mapping procedure, than is true for written or oral language, or 'representational' art. It is not possible to produce specific metaphorical or metonymic readings based purely on a decontextualised piece of music. The social function of music is to limit more widely the areas within which readings might be made. With music signifying in only broad terms, and with the lyrics in popular music being relatively unimportant, INXS may lack some control over the process of meaning-making with regard to the film-clip for 'The Messenger'.

In order to explore the implications of the film-clip form for the hierarchy of discourses (and in this instance, the hierarchy of authors), three small focus groups of university students — one group taken from a Race and Ethnicity course, familiar with Tracey Moffatt's work and arguments around it; one group of self-identified INXS fans; and a third control group, with neither explicit affiliation — viewed 'The Messenger', without any introduction or knowledge of its provenance.  They were asked to recall lyrics, description of the song, and elements of the visual discourse.

When presented with deliberately general questions asking 'What is the song about?' and 'What is the video about?', every viewer was able to present an account of the film-clip; by contrast, only a very few respondents presented any comments on the song itself: and all of these comments in fact read the song through the visual elements.  One Moffatt-group student suggested that the song says

> ...you will have to wait and Hold on!, because your time is coming.  I could only infer from their Australian origins that it is probably about Aboriginal people waiting for emancipation...

A member of the control group suggests that the song is about:

> Women's control over men.  The power of seduction which women can exude over men...

Again, such an interpretation of 'the song' bears little relation to any elements of the lyrics or music; it is rather made specifically in terms of the visual discourse.

Most telling are the various comments which suggest that 'I didn't listen to the words, so I haven't a clue'; 'I was too busy watching the video to listen to the words of the song'; 'So busy wondering what the hell was going on in the video, it totally detracted from the song'; and 'couldn't make out the words'. Similarly, when asked after the screening to suggest from memory some words of the song, the vast majority of participants, across all three groups, could not remember a single line.  A few remembered 'Hold on', and one INXS fan was able to remember both that and 'Don't put the blame on the messenger'.  By contrast, most of the respondents could provide between

three and six of the captions from the screen, including 'Paint his nails red', 'Private Boom Boom', 'We've got them', 'Training film', 'Kidnap', 'Ow', 'Escape at Dawn', 'Help us', 'Torture Chamber', 'Come Back', 'INXS in hoods', 'Momma Boss', 'Kung Fu Doll', 'Hideout', 'Sigh', 'I'm in love', and 'Sista X'.

This material is obviously not offered as any kind of proof about the interpretations which will be made of 'The Messenger'. However, in the question of the relative hierarchies of a visual, 'Tracey Moffatt' discourse, and an aural, 'INXS' discourse, it is clear that it is in fact possible for viewers of this text to practically ignore the song, despite its supposed originary status, and to focus almost entirely on the visual elements of the film-clip in making interpretations.


## B.3.11

It is important to note that the conceptual schema which is invoked if Tracey Moffatt is understood to be the author of this text is avowedly fictional. It is produced across an oeuvre of publicly-circulated texts (including biographies and interviews), all of which are treated as texts. Tracey Moffatt herself is not invoked as a corporeal example of creative genius, anchoring meaning. This point is made in order to address the work of Andy Medhurst, who, in calling for the necessary authorship of marginal groups, turns to a 'biographical approach', one which involves 'real people's lived lives' in a move which is 'defiantly corporeal' (Medhurst 1991: 202, 203). Such a move requires an estimation of biography as truth; and, in the examples he gives of investigating whether authors are 'really' homosexual, seems to be a needlessly invasive theoretical move.

In this work, the 'Aboriginal' film-maker Tracey Moffatt is the result of a series of quite public discourses. The horizons of interpretation resulting from the invocation of her authorship depend on conceptual schema which are taken from publicly available texts. There is no need to invoke the 'real life' of Tracey Moffatt in order for this authorship to be meaningful. The author function is a discursive effect. Elements of biography may increase its perceived potency, but are not an essential part of its construction. Calling

for the assertion of marginal authorship is not a call for the invasive rewriting
of personal biographies of those involved as authors.

**B.3.12**

It is generally accepted that Aboriginal people must be given access to the
industry of representations — that is, film and television production. Such a
demand is often formulated in a way which suggests that Aboriginal film-
makers will necessarily produce formally different texts. Graeme Turner, for
example, suggests that:

> If we are interested in films which challenge rather than simply reproduce
> existing racist ideologies, we must realise how important it is for black
> Australians to have access to media of representation (Turner, 1988: 137).

In such writing, an 'Aboriginal aesthetic' may be tied in to Aboriginal
authorship. For example, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra suggest of *Jedda* that
the voice over which introduces the character of Joe in that film exhibits an
'indifference to anything that an Aborigine would regard as a relevant
genealogy here declares [the film's] nonAboriginal authorship' (Hodge and
Mishra, 1991: 65).

But as Marcia Langton makes clear: 'demands and strategies for controlling
representation do not by themselves work to produce a better representation
of Aboriginal people' (Langton, 1993: 10). Aboriginal authorship need not
produce a text which is marked in any way as aesthetically 'Aboriginal'. For
the work of this chapter, however, the presence or otherwise of anything that
could be constructed as a textual Aboriginality is not a primary concern.
Marion Benjamin notes of the film *Two Laws* that: 'such [collaborative] film
practices are as much about forms of control...as they are about new or
authentic forms of cultural expression' (Benjamin, 1993: 25). In the terms of
this work, the publicly available discourse of Aboriginal authorship of a text
is as interesting as the text itself.

Gayatri Spivak has suggested that 'The question 'who should speak' is less
crucial than 'who will listen?'' (Spivak and Gunew, 1990: 59). The project of

Orientalism, and a functionally similar Aboriginalism, involves 'silencing actual Aborigines and negating their right to speak on their own behalf...' (Mishra, 1989: 28). But, as Spivak's comments make clear in their sensitivity to discursive formations, subaltern bodies (in this case, Aboriginal people) are not literally 'voiceless' (Molnar, 1994b: 12). Indeed, this metaphor can prove disempowering. Rather, they speak: but not from positions which circulate publicly. Aboriginal speech is not heard. Aboriginalism:

> ...deprives Aborigines of the possibility of authority, of being authors of their own meanings, able to monitor and influence the meanings that circulated about and among Aborigines (Hodge and Mishra, 1991: 74).

In such a situation, the acknowledgement of the possibility of an Aboriginal author is in itself a powerful move. In the very act of acknowledging that Moffatt could be regarded as an author, discursive formulations of silent Aboriginality are challenged. When the author function is sited as the centre of meaning production, as a subjective control of creativity, this necessarily rewrites histories of the silent, subaltern Aboriginal body. Already before any meaning which is made with an interpretive schema of Moffatt's authorship, the very fact that such an authorship can be contemplated is in itself an important social text. The fact of Moffatt as author may be just as important as the interpretations of the particular textual material which are then made through the schema of this authorship.

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1   This play of supposed opposites is explicit in the titles of such pieces as *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Nicholson, 1990); 'Postmodernism or Post-colonialism today' (During, 1987); and *Past the Last Post: Theorising Postmodernism and Postcolonialism* (Adam and Tiffin, eds, 1991).

2   See also Michaels, 1987e: 33; Mishra, 1989: 168; and Muecke, 1992: 45.

3   Essie Coffey, director of the documentaries *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, and *My Life as I Live it*, is also well known, but Moffatt has proven to be the most popular object of journalistic discourses.

4   Karen Jenning's *Sites of Difference* uses a still from *Night Cries*; Marcia Langton's *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television*...has an image from *Bedevil*, featuring Moffatt herself.

5  Beyond the industrial considerations of Knapp (1993), the only work seems
    to be that of Adrian Martin (1995), who has indeed begun precisely the
    process of writing this clip into Moffatt's oeuvre.  He produces an
    interpretation of the piece as 'art', made through Moffatt's other films.

6  Again, exceptions such as the recognised status of producers Stock, Aiken
    and Waterman as authors of the oeuvre that includes Kylie Minogue,
    later Bananarama, and so on, serve only to prove the point by their
    rarity.

# Chapter B.4: Star

## B.4.1

Ernie Dingo is probably the best known Aboriginal actor in Australia today. Indeed, he may well vie with Cathy Freeman for the title of best known Aboriginal person in the continent. The actor's output is prodigious. At one point in mid-1994, Dingo was appearing regularly three times a week on Australian television: starring in the ABC's detective mini-series, *Heartland*; presenting a lifestyle/travel show, *The Great Outdoors* (Channel Seven); and appearing in repeats of the children's drama *Dolphin Cove* (Channel Ten).

Dingo originally appeared on television as a comedian, working as a regular member of the comedy-sketch program *Fast Forward* (Artists Services, 1989). His other regular television-personality role has involved presenting segments of the travel program *The Great Outdoors*. He appears in children's programs: *A Waltz Through the Hills* is a series about a brother and sister who go cross country when their mother dies, and Dingo plays the bushie who looks after them; *Clowning Around* and *Clowning Around 2* present him as a friend of the central (white) child, this time a boy wanting to learn circus skills; and *Dolphin Cove* features white kids, white father, and Dingo as a black friend of the family. The actor has also made guest appearances in *GP*, as an Aboriginal doctor confused about his cultural identity; *The Flying Doctors*, as an Aboriginal father caught in a cultural clash over the medicines of different races; *Heartbreak High*, as a media studies teacher and basketball coach. He has further appeared in *Relative Merits* (ABC, 1987); *Cowra Breakout* (ABC); *No Sugar* (ABC); *Dirtwater Dynasty* (Kennedy Miller, 1988); *Dreaming of Lords* (ABC); *Archer* (Roadshow, Coote and Carroll, 1985); *Off the Dish* (Channel Ten, 1986); *Rafferty's Rules* (Channel Seven, 1990); *Joe Wilson* (Channel Seven, 1987); *The Saint in Australia* (Channel Seven, 1990); and *Dearest Enemy* (ABC, 1989). He has played roles in feature films such as *The Fringe Dwellers, Crocodile Dundee II, Tudawali, Until the End of the World, Blue Lightning* and *Cappuccino*. He appears as himself on a variety of

entertainment programs: on the *Ray Martin Show*, Dingo performs as a comic, playing a vacuum cleaner as a didgeridoo; in Vetta pasta ads, he again plays himself as a comedian, mocking bush tucker; he appears in his own special profile on *60 Minutes* — 'The wit and wisdom of Ernie Dingo'. He is on the 1995 Logie Awards, a range of Channel Seven promos, television coverage of the AFL Football match between the West Coast Eagles and the Melbourne Demons (29.4.95). He has appeared on *Celebrity Wheel of Fortune*, been interviewed on *Mulray*, chatted, on *TVTV*, about his work. The name and the image of Ernie Dingo are well-known currency.

## B.4.2

This chapter wishes to argue that if a program-text features a well-known personality such as Ernie Dingo, that actor's public persona can work as an authorising presence. The limits of interpretation placed on that text might well involve making sense of the Aboriginal character in terms of what is already known about the actor from other texts. When interpreting a text in which Ernie Dingo appears, it may well be that the most important aspect of that text is the presence of Ernie Dingo.

The previous chapter has argued that the name of an author can work to close down possible meanings of a text — providing an interpretive schema gleaned from knowledge of other texts, the name of the author institutes expectations and guidelines for making meanings. This may also be true for the presence of an actor. As noted above, the director has historically proven to be the most attractive figure for those writers who require a central authoring presence in filmic texts. However, s/he is not the only possible author of a filmic (or televisual) text. Even in traditional film writing, there has existed the possibility of validating other creative personnel as authors of texts[1].

The potential of an actor to be read as an author of a text, appealed to as a guarantor of meaning, is a common one. Theoretically, John Caughie has suggested various roles which might be invoked in explorations of authorship — as well as the director, these include 'the actor, the designer' (Caughie, 1981: 205). In everyday discourses of cinema, actors are also, in a common-

sense way, constructed as the authors of film. In Hollywood productions, for example, the idea of texts being authored by actors is familiar enough to pass without comment (*Cliffhanger* is a Sylvester Stallone film; *I Love Trouble* a Julia Roberts film. These attributions are unsurprising and seemingly make sense).

In critical work, the idea again has a visible history. The tradition of writing on stars often explicitly relies on the idea that the actor should be understood as anchoring a reading of a text. Alexander Walker, for example, interpreting Bette Davis' performances, does so in terms more of her intertextual persona (both from other films and from non-filmic intertexts) than from the textual evidence of each given film (Walker, 1986: 47 - 48); while Charles Affron, writing on Greta Garbo, explicitly excludes textual evidence from consideration in making meaning of Garbo's performances, because it clashes with his image of the actress from her other films (Affron, 1977: 193).

This work has been addressed academically by Richard Dyer. For him, the film text is a 'structured polysemy' (Dyer, 1986b: 68), within which the images of stars work to 'stabilise audience response' (Dyer, 1986b: 11). Stars help provide the limits of interpretation, through the 'always-already-signifying nature of star images' (Dyer, 1986b: 144). Evidence brought to bear on a film from other texts and intertexts in which an actor's image is formed, help to limit the possible interpretations of a polysemic text.

Lest it be argued that this work is not appropriate to the Australian situation because it deals with 'stars', and that term is geographically and perhaps even historically precise — Ernie Dingo is not a star in the same way that Bette Davis was a star — it should be noted that the use of the term 'star' in each of the above writers is in fact quite misleading. In critical work, the use of the term has often collapsed several quite distinct meanings. On the one hand, Dyer's arguments about the 'star image' available as an interpretive schema in the work of producing meaning, can apply in fact not only to 'stars', but to all well-known actors who have appeared across a body of work. Simultaneously, however, the term is used in quite a distinct way: there is a belief that to be a 'star' is to exhibit a particular 'charisma', 'star quality', or even 'Star Performance' (Affron, 1977) on the screen. These textual qualities are not only quite subjective but in fact, need bear no relation to wider considerations of star status: an actor can be famous, appear in many films

and earn much money without any writer perceiving such 'star' qualities (see Mark Roth [1981] on Dick Powell, for example). Finally, the term 'star' applies to an actor, probably American, whose salary is huge and whose lifestyle is glamorous; an icon of material success and indulgence, whose ideological work may be to reinforce messages about the desirability of conspicuous consumption (Dyer, 1986b: 36; King, 1987). This use of the term is not appropriate in this work, certainly in the case of Ernie Dingo, and probably in relation to the Australian situation more generally (Australia's best known actors are resolutely everyday in their image — Bryan Brown, Jack Thompson, Bill Hunter). If another term is to be employed to describe the effect of Dingo's image (constructed from both primary and secondary intertexts) working to provide a schema which sets horizons on interpretations of his work, perhaps a more recognisable term would be 'celebrity' (he does indeed appear in 'Celebrity Wheel of Fortune')[2].

The 'star image' ('celebrity image') which sets 'horizons of expectation' for interpreting a performance (Naremore, 1988: 263) is formed partly from the actor's films and television roles (Dyer, 1986b: 101); and partly from intertextual discourses which surround these appearances — in television talk shows, magazine articles, 'behind the scenes' reports, biographies, and so on. The star image itself is 'an extra-literary character whose name circulates through publicity, biography and everyday language' (Naremore, 1988: 4; Dyer, 1986b: 68). Of course, such an image is not a static quality. Although certain broad characteristics of a particular actors 'celebrity image' may well be similar across an audience at a given time, it need not be identical for all spectators. It will not be formed from exactly the same body of texts for every viewer; and so on. It will be dynamic, constantly reforming as new texts are worked into it.

### B.4.3

The most general way in which Ernie Dingo's image will contribute to the work of interpretation is by providing the possibility of reading a text as 'authentic'. Richard Dyer suggests that this is a general trait of all actor's images. Because a star image is composed as much of texts purporting to

represent the 'real' actor as of those filmic texts in which characters are portrayed, that image comes to stand as more real than the characters in avowedly fictional texts. If the two coincide, it can be read as a validation of authenticity for the fictional character. 'Sincerity and authenticity' are:

> ...two qualities greatly prized in stars because they guarantee, respectively, that the star really means what he or she says, and that the star really is what he or she appears to be (Dyer, 1987: 11)

When Ernie Dingo's character refers to an aspect of Aboriginal experience — living in a country town in *Heartbreak High*, dealing with racism in *Heartland* — the 'reality' of the celebrity guarantees the 'authentic' experience (Dyer, 1987: 13): knowledge of the actor provided in public but non-fictional texts such as magazine interviews (understood to be 'real') is brought to bear to make meta-interpretations of the 'real' person showing through the character being played.

As well as such general assertions of authenticity, it is possible to make more specific readings of the intertextual image which has been constructed around Dingo. As noted above, the amount of film and television work in which Ernie Dingo has appeared is huge. There are certain continuities in both his avowedly fictional roles, and in the secondary discourses of the 'real' Dingo, across this massive oeuvre.

It is perhaps worth noting, as has already been hinted at in Chapter A.2, that the 'Ernie Dingo' of the films and the 'Ernie Dingo' of television are quite different images. Film work has presented Dingo as a wife-beating drunk who faces a violent death (*Tudawali*), a mysterious and unapproachable private eye (*Until the End of the World*), as a symbol of everything about Aboriginal culture which holds back a young girl determined to succeed in white society (*Fringe Dwellers*). As will be suggested below, these characters in fact stand out as incongruous in the wider body of Ernie Dingo's work.

**B.4.4**

One important aspect of Dingo's celebrity image is the way in which he is
often constructed as being representative of all Aboriginal people. Discussing
the celebrity image of this black actor, it is fascinating to initially consult work
by Richard Dyer on the image constructed around the Black American actor,
Paul Robeson. Dyer points out a series of ways in which Robeson's image
was directly involved with his racial background. It is somewhat depressing,
when comparing Robeson's image with that of Dingo, half a century later, to
find that in many ways the image of this later celebrity parallels that of the
earlier actor. An Aboriginal image is still racially specific for Dingo in much
the same way that was true for Paul Robeson. For example, Dyer notes that
Robeson's image presented him as representative of the Black race in general.
In a similar way, many of the discourses circulated around Dingo take him as
standing metonymically for the whole of the Aboriginal race: and not just
across Australia, but across the whole of time. In some ways, such work is
explicit and legitimate. Dingo is sometimes made into an ambassador:

> Today, he balances comedy, a serious film future, and the aspirations of his
> people...he is an actor, comedian, singer, dancer, cartoonist, and expert on
> Aboriginal culture (Van Nunen, 1991: 22).

On another level, however, Dingo's representativeness is seen to be neither
cultural nor political. Rather, an implicitly spiritual connection with
Aboriginal culture is occasionally suggested. In some articles, for example, it
is assumed that Dingo will have an opinion on all issues and topics related to
the Aboriginal. Often he does, and the assumption passes without comment.
For example, he gives his feelings on the Aboriginal response to the
Bicentennial, with which he was involved (Amor, 1988). However, when
interviewers ask questions based on this assumption, and Dingo chooses not
to speak for his race, attention is drawn to the thought processes at work. For
example, in the 'wacky' television variety program, *Mulray* (Channel Seven,
1994), the host jokes with Ernie about a variety of things, including just this
supposed representativeness — 'You'd be aware, of the Umbara (sic) people's
dreamtime story, I suppose, would you?', Mulray asks, jokingly, making it
clear that he expects no such thing. But in the same interview, only a few

minutes later, Doug Mulray rounds off a (largely innocuous and jovial) interview, which has involved jokes about penises and kissing Cate Blanchette, by suddenly saying: 'I have to ask you — why do so many black men die in Australian jails?'. Dingo has no answer for this, and struggles to keep up his side of the conversation. To the interviewer, it appears that a quick equation can be drawn: Dingo = black = deaths in custody. In fact, Dingo need have special knowledge on this topic only in so far as it concerns people of his own race, and he has already stated in this interview that: 'I don't know everything about every blackfella in the country'. The questions of Doug Mulray, however, only make sense to the degree to which this is understood to be untrue.

A different level of representativeness is assumed in a description such as that presented by Van Nunen:

> This year, Dingo was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for his services to the arts. As Governor General Bill Hayden pinned the award to his lapel, he whispered to Dingo, You're a bit young to be getting this. Ernie just looked at him through 40,000 year old eyes and didn't reply (Van Nunen, 1991: 24).

Ernie Dingo's eyes are not 40,000 years old. The metaphor insists on a spiritual tie to every Aborigine who has ever lived: a tie that allows little space for Dingo as an individual, but rather requires that he carry the burden of representativeness for, not just Aborigines; but Aboriginality in all its forms and manifestations.

These knowledges, brought to bear on a text which might otherwise make no claim for such a representativeness, may well encourage the production of meanings in which every action performed by, and every characteristic attributed to, Dingo's character, begin to bear an intolerable burden of representativeness. The image constructed for the actor is one of a typical Aborigine, a representative of all his race. This may well play a part in setting the limits of interpretation for the texts in which he appears.

## B.4.5

Again, Richard Dyer notes that in the case of Paul Robeson, contemporary
discourses often found his physical presence as worthy of comment. The
black body was included as a fascinating part of the Robeson image (Dyer,
1987: 126). Again, this directly parallels the case of Ernie Dingo's celebrity
image. In particular, Dingo's height, and his legs, form part of his image. In
*Heartland*, they are noted textually — as when Vince (Dingo) and Beth
approach his home town across the desert, he changes his trousers. Included
in this scene are jokes about his 'Aboriginal' legs: long and skinny. In non-
filmic contexts, Berwyn Lewis for example states that: 'Dingo takes many
worlds in one stride of his infinitely long legs' (Lewis, 1988: 36); Janine Cohen
states that 'it is his long, thin legs that you notice first' (Cohen, 1987: 45). For a
star's image to include reference to a body part is not unusual (Jane Russell,
breasts, Madonna, navel, Julia Roberts, mouth). In the case of Dingo, it is
noticeable that this physical component is racialised: that the 'infinitely long'
legs are a recognisable Aboriginal physical attribute. Dingo's image draws
attention to physicality; even where texts do not specifically draw attention to
the 'Aboriginal legs', interpretations of his work may well involve a
fascination with the physical difference of Dingo, brought over from the
intertexts of the celebrity image.

## B.4.6

The parameters of Dingo's celebrity image can best be suggested in a series of
terms, closely imbricated: authenticity; naturalness; affability; niceness; non-
aggressiveness; availability; accessibility; reconciliation; humour; common
sense. In picking through the texts which contribute to this image, it becomes
obvious that the 'real' Dingo revealed in contextual material is involved in a
specific relationship with both Aboriginal and settler cultures; and his image
signifies this relationship very strongly. As is noted in Chapter A.2, and as
will be explored in C.2, current discourses of Aboriginality invoke a suspicion
that those Aborigines who have been successful in white industries such as
the media are not authentically Aboriginal. This belief relies on the
understanding that Aboriginality and white culture are incompatible. For an

Aboriginal person to have succeeded in, or to be adept at living with, white culture, must involve being tainted by it.

With such suspicions always in place, the writing from which Dingo's image is constructed is involved in a constant process of re-asserting the actor's authenticity as Aboriginal. For example, his 'tribal name' is invoked ('Oondamaroo', in *Mulray*, and *Sixty Minutes*). He was born on 'Bullardoo cattle station' (Bowring, 1988: 62), and:

> [m]y mother was a cook on the cattle station and my grandmother delivered me and my aunty was the midwife. The closest hospital was about two hours away, and it was easier to have me on the job! (Dingo, in Amor, 1988: 35)

His 'tribe' is named — 'Wudjadi' — and 'Dingo strives to keep his identity as a member of the Wudjadi tribe' (Amor, 1988: 35). His surname proves a constantly fascinating item. It is almost too perfect, a simulacrum of Aboriginality, again suggesting that Dingo is just playing the role of the blackfella. But no, the articles insist, it is authentic:

> Dingo inherited his surname from his grandfather, Jimmy, who worked with dogs. The white people could not pronounce his Aboriginal name so they called him Jimmy with the dingoes, which eventually became Jimmy Dingo (Cohen, 1987: 46. see also Bowring, 1988; Van Nunen, 1991: 25; and *Sixty Minutes*, 1994).

As well as such histories, Dingo's authentic Aboriginality is asserted in other ways. He 'prefers the bush to the coast', for example, says the *Sixty Minutes* account of this actor. This report also asserts that Dingo has a 'serious message' about his Aboriginality, illustrating this fact with a clip of Dingo, face painted, sitting in a cave, in a meaningful close up, reading Aboriginal history aloud, in a sonorous voice. He is accompanied by clap sticks and 'mysterious' music.

Other articles assert Dingo's blackfella nature:

> Despite his warmth, there's a restive quality about Dingo that makes him difficult to pin down, as though he's always going walkabout in his mind. Wearing a crisp, navy blue Pierre Cardin suit, and politely sipping a Fosters

in a yuppie hotel in Sydney's Glebe, he's like a hyperactive adolescent
dressed in his Sunday clobber to pay a perfunctory visit to a maiden aunt
(Van Nunen, 1991: 22).

If this were as far as Dingo's image went, it would be similar to that of many
other Aboriginal actors — David Gulpilil, David Ngoombujarra, Robert
Tudawali have all been the subjects of images which constructed them as
being in touch with authentic Aboriginal culture. But Dingo's image is
differentiated from these others. While asserting all the time his authentic
Aboriginality, contextual discourses simultaneously insist upon Dingo's
ability to live in white society. The comments of Van Nunen, quoted above,
suggesting that Dingo's Aboriginality prevents his fully functioning within
settler culture, are in fact quite unusual. For perhaps the most important
element in Dingo's image is his figure as a fully-functional bi-cultural
personality. Partly, this ability to cope with both white and Aboriginal
cultures is present in the knowing distance which is often placed between
Dingo and the traditional Aboriginal culture he is at other times taken to
embody. As the *Sixty Minutes* interview makes clear, a central part of Dingo's
star image, taken from his role in *Dundee II*, is 'that wink'. That wink — when
Dingo says, in all seriousness, that his Aboriginal compatriot wants to eat the
bad guys; and then gives the heroine a wink that only she can see, to imply
that he is joking — places Dingo outside of a mythical and inarticulate
Aboriginal culture. The actor's Vetta adverts, and appearance on *Mulray* —
both of which denigrate bush tucker — work in a similar function. 'I
wouldn't eat it', he says of the baked goanna he has just described to the host
of the chat show. Comedy thus distances Dingo: he may be a representative
of Aboriginal culture, but he can also step outside it, in order to view it from a
white perspective.

Apart from this comic distance, Dingo's ability to live successfully in two
cultures is an aspect of his celebrity image which is present in much of the
writing that surrounds him. For example, Stuart Freeman, the assistant
director on *Heartland*, states in an interview that:

> He's a remarkable person in that he has managed to assimilate to the white
> man's way, but he has not moved one iota from his Aboriginal background
> and upbringing (MacMillan, 1994: 22)

Of course, this success in white society also makes it necessary to reiterate at all times his authenticity. Sally Dingo states that:

> Dingo is not the sophisticated black guy living in a white man's world that people think. He plays the game, but he's still black as black (quoted in Van Nunen, 1991: 25).

The two cultures are constantly played off each other, in a way that is quite specific to Dingo's image:

> He is as much at home in the Aboriginal tent embassy currently occupying the site of Mrs Macquarie's chair in Sydney as he is in New York, the bush, and a film studio...He is an activist and an actor, a man who knows his Dreaming, or traditional history, and he knows white culture, be it Coca Cola, Bollinger, or his neat black Reeboks (Lewis, 1988: 36).

In short Dingo walks a 'tightrope...between two cultures' (anon, *West Australian*, 1991: 15). According to the materials which present the 'real' Ernie Dingo, he is managing successfully to walk that tightrope. As the voice-over states in *Sixty Minutes*, 'Ernie Dingo is one of the rarest of Australian species — a black man who has succeeded in white man's society'.

Dingo's amphibious ability to survive equally well in either culture is neatly illustrated in his clothing. As common sense would suggest, and as Richard Dyer has written, clothes signify more than simply the ability to keep warm:

> ...clothes are major signifiers of power...When the West is in the ascendant, other nations dress in Western clothes; but when the relations of power shift, the leaders of non-Western nations can wear their national clothes (Dyer, 1987: 91).

Bearing in mind, then, that clothes can stand metonymically for cultures, it is important that Dingo seems able to live comfortably with either. When appearing as 'himself', dressing as Ernie Dingo, he wears a variety of Western clothes, often favouring the intense formality of suit and tie (*Mulray, Sixty Minutes, Celebrity Wheel of Fortune*). Van Nunen's is an awkward voice in the construction of a Dingo discourse, complaining as she does that the actor looks awkward in Western clothing. It is, rather, Dingo's standard dress. Yet

he also wears clothing that is coded 'Aboriginal' (*Sixty Minutes, Dundee II*). To
see him working in either of these codes of dress is not unusual.

His success in sustaining an image which retains Aboriginality, while making
it functional within white culture, has lead to Dingo's association with
discourses redolent of reconciliation: 'He's looking forward to the day when
white and black will stand together' (anon, *West Australian*, 1991: 17), for
example. *Sixty Minutes* refers to Dingo's desire to: 'communicate the rich
heritage of Aboriginal life — to all Australians'. Similarly, on *Mulray*, when
the host asks if Dingo thinks Australians are racist, Dingo replies that all
Australians are racist. When Mulray, looking as though he has hit on a clever
reply, asks, 'Does that include black Australians?', Dingo looks at him as
though he has just missed the point, and says, 'Of course — we're Australians
too'.

The image constructed for Dingo, accepted as successful within Aboriginal
and settler cultures, means that as a symbol for reconciliation, he is 'a good
example to both black and white' — as a viewer's letter says, commenting on
the *Sixty Minutes* report (*Sixty Minutes*, Channel Nine, 19 June 1994). As will
be suggested below, this aspect of his image is a potent one in stabilising
interpretations of individual texts in which Dingo appears.


## B.4.6

Specific aspects of Dingo's personality are co-opted into the image of this
reconciliatory figure: he is a non-aggressive figure; he is not threatening; he is
available, and ordinary. In short, Ernie Dingo is *nice*.

Dyer has noted that Paul Robeson was 'taken to embody a specific set of black
qualities — naturalism, primitiveness, simplicity...' (Dyer, 1987: 70).
Although these do not line up directly with Dingo, at least two of the terms —
naturalism and simplicity — relate to aspects of his image; and to the figure of
reconciliation which the celebrity image of Dingo communicates.

Dingo has a 'delightful, natural talent...a man at peace with himself and the
environment' (Frank Arnold, director of *Waltz Through the Hills*, quoted in

Cohen, 1987: 45). His niceness is linked to his naturalness and his
ordinariness. Ernie Dingo describes the producers of *Crocodile Dundee II* as
'just a couple of very ordinary blokes' (Bowring, 1988: 62), and this
vocabulary seems appropriate to him.

> It is impossible to believe he aspires to the glamorous life. 'I prefer to sit
> around with my family, having nieces and nephews climbing all over me. I
> wouldn't know how to be a celebrity' (Bowring, 1988: 63).

This image of ordinariness extends into an associated discourse of common
sense: Lisa Amor presents Dingo's theories on improving race relations: 'His
idea is that understanding could be developed by the simple exercise of
Australians meeting one another' (Amor, 1988: 35).

A potent contributing factors to Dingo's ordinariness is a certain availability.
He is not a threatening figure, despite his international film success. This
absence must in part be due to the actor's constant, banal television
appearances. Dingo's image is, almost literally, everyday. He is not just a
film 'star'/actor. He is also a television celebrity, who appears on travel
shows, on game shows, on television adverts, government announcements,
documentaries, and children's programs. This last group of shows especially
— appearances on *Clowning Around I* and *II*, *Waltz Through the Hills*, *Dolphin
Cove* — contributes to the general niceness of the man's image.

Ernie Dingo was unhappy with *Fast Forward*, finding the program too
aggressive: 'If you keep throwing shit at other people like some shows do,
then sooner or later some of it is going to blow back at you' (quoted in
Devlyn, 1991: 54). He: 'doesn't see much value in being cruel and unkind'
(anon, *West Australian*, 1991: 16); 'There's enough animosity in the world
without that crap', he says (Dingo, quoted in anon, *West Australian*, 1991: 16).
Dingo's smile also contributes to this part of his image. It is explicitly noted
in the texts which construct his celebrity image — his 'infectious smile' (*Sixty
Minutes*); 'a smile that takes over his face' (Cohen, 1987: 45) — and is much in
evidence in televisual texts. In *Mulray*, *Sixty Minutes*, *The Great Outdoors*,
*Wheel of Fortune*, Dingo will rarely finish a sentence without breaking into a
smile and making some sort of joke. The media studies teacher he plays in
*Heartbreak High* appears at first much more serious: he does not smile.

However, the image of Ernie Dingo still does not allow this strange new teacher to be truly threatening; and after a series of difficulties about this character's provenance have been worked out, he does indeed begin to smile more easily, forming a camaraderie with one of the pupils. Initially rather severe, the character quickly becomes more approachable. This seems to make perfect sense. It is, after all, Ernie Dingo.

## B.4.7

Unsurprisingly, this niceness (in terms of personal non-aggression) is easily drawn into more general political discourses. Dingo's image, as stated above, is more explicitly related to discourses of reconciliation than any other Aboriginal celebrity's. When Dingo makes comments about his own personal non-aggressiveness, stating that 'It's not Aboriginal to conquer' (anon, *West Australian*, 1991: 17), the sentiment explicitly links the personal to the political in his image.

Dingo's common sense and lack of aggressiveness means that politics (in the sense of traditional, party politics) has not been a central focus in the construction of his celebrity image. It is true that part of the honesty and authenticity that comprises Dingo's image is that he does not deny the reality of racism, or the need to challenge it. But compared to an image like that of Gary Foley, for example (Flanagan, 1993: Litson, 1989), Dingo does not signify these political concerns in such a way: 'I try not to be political, but I can't get away from the fact of my Aboriginality' (Dingo, quoted in Brough, 1989: 102). The actor: 'has been criticised by some factors of the Aboriginal movement for not being militant enough' (Van Nunen, 1991: 25). This aspect of Dingo's image is perhaps best characterised by absence: that while contextual materials present him talking about specific instances of racism, more general political anger is less present. In *Mulray*, given the chance to address black deaths in custody, Dingo refuses the opportunity. This is a typical part of his image. Again, the common sense of Dingo, his idea that racism will be overcome through the 'simple exercise of Australians meeting each other' (Amor, 1988: 35) presents a non-politics, a non-racism that is a part of his image much more than is explicit commentary on land rights.

## B.4.8

Part of Dingo's non-aggressiveness, and the fact that he can address racial prejudice in Australia without his image taking on overtones of didacticism or high-handedness, comes from his humour. This is perhaps the single most important part of Dingo's image. He is a comedian. That is how he was first known; it has been an important part of many of his acting roles; it is emphasised in most articles about him, and in all histories of his career (he is, as the *Western Daily Mail* headlines it, a 'Black Humorist': Cohen, 1987). His humour interacts with all other aspects of his celebrity image, and colours every comment that Dingo makes in his own voice.

A typical example of the implementation of humour in the formation of 'Ernie Dingo' relates to the Bicentennial. Talking about an event that inspires much Aboriginal anger, Dingo voices concerns; but makes them palatable by joking rather than attacking:

> What are we doing celebrating 200 years of penal settlement? You could be hard up for a drink, that could be one excuse (Dingo, quoted in Amor, 1988: 35)

His humour keeps him from being perceived as militant; it reinforces an image of him as down to earth, nice, normal. More generally, it creates a non-aggressive Aboriginality:

> Aboriginal humour is basically untapped. We laugh at nearly everything: everything is basically a laugh. We have moments of seriousness, but basically an Aboriginal lifestyle is full of humour... (Dingo, quoted in Brough, 1989: 102)

> What we [Aborigines] are all about is laughing at ourselves, and it's all we've ever done (Dingo, quoted in Devlyn, 1991: 55).

This humorous character has particular implications for Dingo's comments which are made in a serious mode. One possible pairing of antonyms might construct 'humorous' as being opposed to 'serious'. Although Jerry Palmer has argued that this is based more on generic prejudice than actual social

function (Palmer, 1987), it does have some relevance to the construction of Dingo's image. Some texts are concerned to insist that Dingo's humorous image makes it impossible to read serious political concern into his performances:

> Dingo tosses of one-liners with alacrity, but ask him a serious question, and he'll sit there looking like the elastic in his underwear is too tight (Van Nunen, 1991: 22).

But, once again, Van Nunen's is an atypical comment; and most writing on Dingo does not find it necessary to insist that the actor's humour makes him any less serious. In fact, he is well able to talk about serious issues that relate to Aboriginal experience. Amor's article, 'The Dingo Manifesto', for example, presents his feelings on the Bicentennial, showing him to be perfectly capable of addressing such important issues intelligently. As Jerry Palmer suggests, humorous is not exclusive of seriousness. Rather, it may be the opposite of quite another quality, of 'solemnity'. Indeed, Dingo's image is not a solemn one. The actor can well raise serious issues: but in doing this, he usually removes any sense of confrontation by simultaneously invoking humour. But that humour need not destroy his seriousness. For instance, appearing on *Sixty Minutes*, Dingo interrogates the interviewer with a revealing catechism:

> Dingo: We're a multicultural country, aren't we? How do you say yes in French?
>
> Interviewer: Oui.
>
> Dingo: How do you say yes in German?
>
> Interviewer: Jah
>
> Dingo: How do you say yes in Spanish?
>
> Interviewer: Si.
>
> Dingo: How do you say yes in any one of the 3500 Aboriginal dialects of Australia?
>
> Interviewer: You've got me there. (*Sixty Minutes*)

In this exchange, Dingo makes a serious point; but in doing it as a game, and with a smile, and with timing that allows what he says to be (almost) funny, it is presented as not didactic. Rather, it is surprising; and it seems to be common sense.

Similarly, in *Mulray*, when the interviewer suddenly switches the tone of the interview to ask about black deaths in custody, the seriousness of the topic is matched by the solemnity in Mulray's tone. However, Dingo's performance rejects this. He immediately looks awkward, as though the 'elastic in his underwear is too tight'. Leaving a noticeable gap, he looks around him, and he says that he does not know why this is the case. He rejects the attempt to make a didactic, unfunny statement, preferring to make an attempt to control the tone of the interview, to keep it generically suitable. Again, fielding another, equally well-meaning, equally concerned, equally portentous question on *Sixty Minutes*, Dingo's performance signifies discomfort. 'What is the importance of what you've done...for your people?', asks the interviewer. Dingo looks away; laughs; says, 'That's not fair, you didn't tell me you were going to ask that one'; thinks about it; finally, makes a half joke: says that he has 'brought a bit of colour into Australian life — if you'll pardon the pun'.

In this refusal of didactic, broad, political and solemn discourses, Dingo's humour is often brought into play; and his status as affable, normal, ordinary and down-to-earth, is reinforced. As was suggested in Chapter B.1, the dominant tone of Aboriginal representation in Australia has been precisely didactic, guilt-inducing, moralising, self-righteous. Some writers explicitly acknowledge the fact that this acts as a turn-off for a white viewer unwilling to face another dose of guilt. In such a climate, the resolutely non-solemn image of Ernie Dingo may well act to render his performances more palatable. Known as an entertainer, and with an image which actively rejects opportunities for self-righteous solemnity, texts in which Ernie Dingo is involved may not provoke the reactions of guilty escape which are produced by texts which do not feature actors with such humorous, accessible, *nice* images.

## B.4.9

All of this work has been presented in order to suggest that the celebrity image of an individual Aboriginal actor may well provide a suitable conceptual schema through which interpretations of an individual text might be limited. How might an understanding of 'Ernie Dingo' (the fabricated

image rather than the Aboriginal actor) place limits on the meanings made from a text such as the ABC's *Heartland* (1994)?

 This thirteen-hour epic mini-series is centred on the character of Vincent Burunga, a police liaison officer.  It investigates his love life, his background, his community, and a murder he investigates.  It is one of the most significant representations of Aboriginality ever produced in Australia.  In terms of sheer bulk, for example, an extra thirteen hours of television centring on an Aboriginal character is an impressive contribution to Australian media history.  The range of characters, the number of locations, and the scope of different situations in which the leads find themselves all work powerfully against the force of representativeness (McKee, 1994).  The facts that some episodes are written by Aboriginal writers (Dingo co-writes one episode); and that Aboriginal people are involved in training for key creative positions (*The Fringe Dwellers'* Kristina Nehm is an assistant directors on later episodes) also contribute to the importance of the program.

As a thirteen-hour long representation of the Aboriginal, *Heartland* is complex and complicated.  It does not revolve around any single incident; and although there is one hermeneutic drive which is sustained from the first to the last episodes, it is not constantly present or foregrounded.  In such a vast text, interpretation is not a simple process.  As is the case with soap operas, it is not expected that each viewer will even have the same experience of the text; much less provide identical readings of the series.  Generically, it is recognisable as an extended mini-series, a form which has until recently flourished in Australia (*Janus, The Damnation of Harvey McHugh, Law of the Land* ).  But as important as the form of this program is the presence of Ernie Dingo, reiterated in many discussions of the show.  He is undoubtedly the 'star' of *Heartland*.  And it is not unreasonable to suggest that Dingo's image will be employed in making readings of the text:

> *Heartland* is well named.  It comes from the heart.  Ernie's heart.  Much of it is his story.  Sequences like this one, being pulled over because you're black, happened to him in real life  (*Sixty Minutes*).

In precisely the way that Dyer describes above, the image of Ernie Dingo is brought in to assure viewers that the Aboriginal experience presented on the

television screen can be understood as authentic. The secondary text, presenting the 'real' Ernie Dingo, accords with the experiences of the character in *Heartland*. The fictional figure of Dingo thus authorises readings of authenticity. Similarly, in a continent whose indigenous people are insistently described as intensely spiritual (Chapter A.2), audiences familiar only with these discourses of the Aboriginal need reassurance that a text has authentic Aboriginal spirit. Once again, secondary texts turn to Dingo's image to anchor this: the program comes from 'Ernie's heart'. His image guarantees that it may be read as authentically, spiritually, Aboriginal.

Other, specific aspects of the 'Dingo' image outlined above interact with the text of *Heartland* to promote particular interpretive approaches. Philippa Hawker describes the general sweep of the series, noting: 'the difficulty the apparently poised Vincent faces in negotiating between two cultures' (Hawker, 1994a: 17). This difficulty in negotiating black and white cultures is a recurring theme in the program. Throughout the thirteen episodes, the presence of two laws is made clear — as, for example, in the last episode, when Alf states that Ricky has been found innocent under white law, but still faces payback under blackfella law. As the central character, a police liaison officer, Vince must constantly try to balance these two laws. In situations such as that in his hometown, when he faces payback himself, Vince must make sense of and live within what appear to be mutually exclusive demands on his sense of the law. Similarly, when the local Aboriginal community riots and attacks the police station, Vince is placed in a situation which dramatises his position: does he leave the protection of the white building and face the mob? Or is he part of that mob? Most often he seems to fully belong to neither group, rather being excluded from each by his knowledge of the other.

It is in his relationship with Beth that the greatest difficulties in living two cultures is shown. For example, after Vince has gone back to Beth's home in Sydney and met her friends, he is uncomfortable and tries to end the relationship. After he has been involved in an incident with the police which reinforces the difficulty he will face trying to live in white culture (a policewoman pulls him over because he is Aboriginal and has a nice car), Vince and Beth have an argument:

> Vince: 'I watched you in that house. With those people. You fitted right in'
>
> Beth: 'Yes. Like you did in Western Australia'.
>
> Vince: 'That was different'
>
> Beth: 'How? Look, I'm sorry if you felt left out. I'm sorry if I hurt you. I made an effort to get on with your people. So don't you go making me feel guilty for staying with my friends when you wouldn't even talk to them...'
>
> (*Heartland*, episode 11)

In this program, then, the fact of living two cultures is made to seem difficult, dangerous and dramatic. It is a violent, physical issue, an issue which involves rioting mobs and thrown stones, possible payback spearings. It is a fatal issue and one which has no easy resolutions. Can the Aboriginal man live in both cultures and survive?

In the series, discourses of both success and failure abound. Bob Maza, a well-known actor whose image might be characterised as one of respectability, plays Alf, an Aboriginal elder. This character criticises Vince's attempts to live across cultures, telling him on several occasions that he cannot live both white and black; that he must be true to his own black culture and roots. A strong character, one admired by others in the program's Aboriginal communities, he insists that successful cross-cultural living is not in fact possible.

But the fact is that Vincent is, visibly, Ernie Dingo. As well as being a policeman facing the difficulties of cross-cultural life on Thursday night's television, Ernie Dingo is also a happily middle-class traveller on *The Great Outdoors* on Fridays; and a friendly Aboriginal man bringing a bit of native culture to a white family on Sunday afternoons. As noted above, intertexts which address Dingo's cross-cultural 'tightrope' claim that he manages to live comfortably in white society, while remaining authentically Aboriginal. Dingo himself stands as living testimony to the fact that the problem Vince faces can be overcome. Can an Aboriginal man live across cultures? demands *Heartland*, dramatising the issue as a crisis. And simultaneously, the question posed by the narrative is answered by the celebrity image: to a watching viewer who knows Ernie Dingo, the angst of an Aboriginal man unable to cope with life across cultures is answered by a similar knowledge of

an actor whose ability to cope in a white media while simultaneously maintaining contacts with his Aboriginal culture are widely publicised as unproblematic. This aspect of Dingo's image may well prove relevant in setting horizons on the interpretations which will be made of *Heartland's* central problematic.

### B.4.10

As mentioned above, the romance between white woman and black man is a central focus of this mini-series. It is shown to be problematic, difficult in that the different expectations of two cultures cannot be easily reconciled. But once again, Dingo's celebrity image can be mobilised as directly relevant in making meanings of this narrative strand.

The promotional campaign that accompanied the launch of the series presents this as in fact the most important aspect of the program. The advert shows Cate Blanchett (Beth), with her head leaning against Dingo's chest. The caption runs: 'A LOVE STORY FORGED AGAINST THE ODDS'. The romance element is foregrounded as the central element of the series. Compared to this, the murder which forms another primary hermeneutic drive is relegated to a poor second place in the publicity material: a subtitle which is entirely separate from the main picture, stating 'A Murder. A Mystery'. Even then, the focus on the romance remains: 'Two Hearts Drawn Forever Closer. Two Lives Changed Forever' (anon, *Heartland*, 1994)

As Warneke points out, 'Among the [program's] most important facets is its romantic pairing of a black man and a white woman: I cannot recall that happening before' (Warneke, 1994: 4). This is indeed the case. In the history of Australian fictional representation of Aboriginality, it is true that to see an Aboriginal man with a white woman is spectacularly uncommon. In the tele-biography *Rose Against the Odds* (Onset Productions, 1990), Lionel Rose kisses his white girlfriend, but it is not a major plot point. Apart from this, examples are so scarce as to be non-existent. That forty years after the 'breakthrough' representation of Aboriginality in *Jedda*, this can still be the case, is an extremely telling comment on the representation of Aboriginal masculinity in Australia.

The relationship — as is the norm in romantic relationships that must remain fraught for the thirteen weeks of a mini-series — proves difficult. The cultural differences between the two protagonists provide a central problem. In the last episode, these issues are still not fully resolved. Even after thirteen weeks of working at the problems of white-Aboriginal romance, the couple have still not managed to work out if such a relationship is in fact possible. Vince refuses Beth's offer to help him out with his problems:

> Vince: 'It's men's business'
> Beth: 'Don't hide behind that. Look, I have spent months trying to see the world your way — not to give offence, to make allowances — but it can't all be a one way street. That's not my way'.
> Vince: 'It's the only way I know' (*Heartland* episode thirteen)

Some of the intertextual advertising material, then, suggests that this central relationship is to be read seriously as a socially important representation of cultural tension (Hawker, 1994b). But while Vince and Beth struggle on screen with their relationship — will they, won't they? will it last? can they cope with each other's cultures and different family situations? — Ernie Dingo again provides a notably relevant intertext. He himself stands as an example of cross-cultural relationships that succeed.

Dingo's wife, Sally, is a familiar component of his more recent celebrity image; and the fact of their different cultures is often presented as relevant to an understanding of Dingo. Sally's fullest manifestation appears in *Sixty Minutes*, where she is interviewed on screen. The occasion is a Dingo family get-together. The interviewer approaches Sally and points out that 'apart from us, you're the only white person here'. The camera pans around a group of Aboriginal faces to reinforce the point. She responds, 'I hadn't even noticed that until you pointed it out just now'. The image constructed is of a happy family, one where race is irrelevant. The program, despite being investigative journalism, does not feel any need to contradict this image with revealing footage showing that in fact the Dingo's do suffer from culture-clash. It is content rather to leave the image of Sally Dingo as happily integrated into the Aboriginal family. Yes, she says, it was a bit strange at first — but now it feels completely natural.

Sally also appears in a photograph accompanying the piece on Dingo by Linda Van Nunen (1991), his wife's (blonde) head leaning against Dingo's chest in position similar to that of Beth's in the *Heartland* advert. The actor's wife is also present in that text of that piece:

> ...they met when Sally, a former advertising manager for the Ten Network, gave him a lift to a charity concert she'd organised, which he was to compere...Dingo says he doesn't socialise much, preferring to spend time with Sally. 'I depend on her a lot', he says. 'You need to have an escape, and my wife is my escape. We laugh a lot, and are educating each other, and that's the fun thing about it. I don't worry about where the next job's coming from. The main thing I worry about is making sure Sal's happy. If she's happy then I'm happy' (Van Nunen, 1991: 25).

The *Sixty Minutes* scene of white wife comfortable and happy with Aboriginal family constructs an image of Ernie Dingo's personal life which is open for use in making meaning of *Heartland*. In the program, Beth's attempts to fit into the Aboriginal community are fraught with difficulties on both sides. She does not, it is made clear, fit in. She is seen as patronising; the Aboriginal people reject her (see, for example, the anger occasioned by her well-meaning advances at the funeral).

However, the marriage to Sally Dingo, working as part of Dingo's celebrity image, makes clear that Vince's (Dingo's) relationship with a white woman in *Heartland* is not, in fact, doomed. Despite the program's suggestion that such a relationship will be a site of crisis, charged with excitement and difficulty, and may indeed finally prove irresolvable; despite all of this, the program can easily be read in quite other directions if the image of Ernie Dingo as a family man — with a banal, jolly, cross-cultural family life — are brought to bear on the work of making meaning from the mini-series. The experiences of Sally, as pale, delicate and as blonde as Beth, are validated as a suitable intertext.

Another way in which Dingo's 'real' relationship may become involved in interpretations of Vince's romance is in the typical Dingo lack of solemnity. In the jokes he makes about his own personal experience of cross-cultural romance, the way in which this is played up as a central 'issue' in the program *Heartland* is somewhat undercut. While Beth and Vince have serious scenes

where they try to come to terms with cross-cultural existence, Dingo rather states that: 'Yeh, it's a mixed marriage — she's from Tasmania and I'm a mainlander'. In a magazine interview he says:

> Sure, there are times when I wish I was white...A good time would be trying to catch a cab at Kings Cross at two in the morning. Nothing much has changed. I still push my wife Sally (who is white), out on to the road to stop a cab...then I slip in behind her (Dingo, quoted in Devlyn, 1991: 55, Devlyn's comments)

The happy romance that Dingo carries with him as part of his image, 'always already signifying' successful cultural crossing, is available to those viewers who know of the 'real' Dingo in their interpretation of *Heartland*.

## B.4.11

The image of a known actor once again validates a series of intertexts, and suggests that readings of those films and television programs may suitably be read as relevant to another text. The actor-as-author is in fact a familiar figure in both critical, journalistic and advertising discourses around film. In relation to Aboriginal representation, the always already signifying image of Ernie Dingo, a fictional and contingent figure, read from a series of primary and secondary texts, may well provide an interpretive schema to set horizons on the interpretations of texts in which that actor is involved. The niceness, cross-cultural success and interracial romance of 'Dingo', constructed from these relevant intertexts, provides a way of making sense of the central aspects of the television mini-series in which he appears. Without any knowledge of the central actor, the meanings which would be made would be open to far more negotiation.

The four chapters of this section, writing on genres and authors, have suggested that certain groups of texts are authorised as oeuvres: linked by industrial discourses either of generic similarity or authorial guarantee. Reading individual texts in the context of these oeuvres, then, provides conceptual schemata — understandings of what to expect in genre pieces,

knowledges of a director, or of a star image — which help to set limits on the interpretations which will be made of television programs and of films.

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[1] See, for example, Higham 1970, who provides detailed readings of the oeuvres of several Hollywood cameramen, distinguishing these by complex auteur-strucutralist titles such as the 'Arthur Miller Ford Western', and the 'Joe August Ford Western' (Higham, 1970: 8).

[2] Dingo has been described as a 'star' in secondary texts; for example, he is featured in an article entitled 'Big Stars Under the Big Top', describing his work in *Clowning Around* (*anon, West Australian*, 1991). However, such a description merely points once again to the many meanings of the term: any central actor in a television program is the 'star' of that show, a meaning so loose it can be applied to Ernie Dingo, Bert Newton or Rolf Harris.

# Part C: Introduction
# Evaluative discourses
# as conceptual
# schemata

The first part of this thesis addressed the implications of the material
conditions of spectatorship for the meanings which are made of textual
Aboriginality. The second part suggested ways in which sanctioned bodies
of intertexts contribute horizons of expectations to the work of
interpretation. This last section deals with those interpretations of films
and of television programs which are already circulated in public arenas,
and which offer explicit conceptual schemata for these texts. Film reviews
and criticism, the discursive practices of journalism and academia, all of
these provide readings and more general schemata which make possible
the act of interpretation.

In this section, reviewing and criticism are understood to function in
similar ways. This is not to deny the differences in production, circulation
and reception of journalistic and academic writing. However, distinctions
which would seek to show that film reviewing and film criticism, for
example, are in fact different in any qualitative way, are rejected. Both
projects are involved in providing ways to talk about texts — and while
collapsing the two in this way may seem reductive, it serves the purpose
of this work, and is not theoretically unjustifiable (Poole, 1984). Meaghan
Morris suggests that although differentiating between these forms of
writing was seen as a worthwhile and important project in the academic
sphere of the late 1950's and early 1960's, most attempts to draw strict
boundaries between the disciplines of reviewing and criticism have failed
to produce convincing distinctions (Morris, 1983). In fact, she suggests, the
demarcation involved has in fact been due largely to snobbery. She gives
the example of one self-proclaimed 'critic' who believes the difference
between criticism and reviewing is a matter of education and intelligence:

the critic must be 'very, very intelligent' (and thus, as Morris points out, the reviewer is presumably 'very, very dumb'; Morris, 1983: 54).  Any convincing distinction between the two projects, then, must involve more an attention to discursive context rather than to assertions of immanent scholarly difference.

The work of movie reviewing has been the focus of little critical attention; similarly, more academic criticism is not always theoretically self-aware. What little writing there is on film reviewing often involves hagiographies of eminent individuals (such as Pauline Kael — Young, 1991), or ideological critiques of the project (McArthur, 1980; McArthur, 1985).  The place of film and television reviews as interpretive schemata has not been explicitly addressed (although the comments of some writers on the economic functions of reviews suggest the ways in which they are used by potential audiences to make interpretations of films even before seeing the texts themselves — Thompson, 1991; McArthur, 1980: 59; McArthur, 1985: 79).  An acknowledgement that reviews are the main source of information about new films implies a similar use (Hunsecker, 1990: 171).

The idea that reviews and criticism provide interpretive schemata, available in the work of making meaning, is not a surprising one.  Colin McArthur is concerned with 'the critic's power'.  Listing the ways in which this is created, he suggests that a:

> ...major source [of the power] is less tangible, though no less real: the power, week after week, to define the terms in which cinema is discussed and understood...[reviews] sustain television's own hierarchy of program categories...and offer the reader/viewer a repertoire of appropriate responses, from the precious through the knowing to the flippant (McArthur, 1980: 61, 80).

Meaghan Morris similarly feels that:

> ...[i]n the heterogeneity of a post-industrial culture, reviewers of film are not arbiters of taste, or judges, or even representative consumers, but mercenaries in the stabilising force of the Thought Police (Meaghan, 1983: 54).

Defining the terms in which cinema is discussed, providing a repertoire of appropriate responses to television texts, working for the 'stabilising' force of the Thought Police, precisely involved in the project of trying to make meaning stable, of structuring the polysemic text and setting limits on the act of interpretation: this is the role of film reviewing and criticism.  In offering explicit interpretations of a film's narrative (as Morris suggests most reviews do), these writers provide obviously relevant schemata with which to approach the work of making sense of a text.  In constantly addressing narrative and character as the most important aspects of a film (filmic aspects such as mise-en-scene or editing are usually dismissed with a single reference to the beauty or otherwise of the text;  it may be no coincidence, as Mike Poole points out [1984], that the vast majority of at least television reviewers have historically come from a literary background), these reviews present interpretive approaches which validate those aspects of the texts as particularly worthy of sustained attention.

As a single example of the frameworks offered by writers on film, one review of *The Fringe Dwellers* can be cited — not as any kind of proof, but rather as a particularly suggestive example of the setting of terms.  Neil Jillett entitles his review 'Unintentional perhaps, but still notable' (1986).  The basic thrust of his review is the production of a reading of the film which goes against the text's explicit features:

> Beresford has been defeated in what he intended with the substance of this film.  And in this defeat lies the film's greatest strength.  It forces its way through the...shades of sentimentality, the token feminism and the prettiness of Don McAlpine's photography, and it shows up most clearly in the confusion of optimism and pessimism at the end.  We have been given a group portrait of people caught between losing the best of their own culture and their inability to accept the culture that the rest of us would impose on them...Beresford has not been able to evade the logic of his film's subject and setting: if you make a trip to the bottom of the social heap, you won't find much to cheer about (Jillett, 1986).

Jillett's review is notable for its explicit attempt to present the 'correct' reading of a film.  It addresses firstly what the reviewer thinks of as a

superficial reading — of the film as a gentle social comedy — and then dismisses this.  Jillett claims that this superficial reading is wrong, that the correct way to read the film is as a text whose flaws reveal the negative side of the subject — Aboriginal life.

To suggest that this review will provide a series of terms through which to interpret the film, and terms that might not arise from an initial viewing of the text itself, does not seem unreasonable.  In suggesting a reading strategy quite different from that which (Jillett feels) the film proposes, the spectator is no longer uninitiated.  Rather, terms of reference — and a specific viewing strategy — have been suggested.

The first chapter of this section deals with realism: a particular concern of both reviewing and criticism, and one which leads to particular interpretations of Aboriginal representation.  The second chapter addresses a concomitant issue, a fantasy which both discursive arenas have rejected, and the way in which the vocabulary invoked in this rejection — of positive images and political correctness — has spanned both reviewing and criticism to produce unhelpful readings of middle-class Aboriginalities.  The third chapter concerns itself with another interpretive approach which occurs in both reviewing and critical arenas, a concern with performance.  This piece takes the opportunity to address the relationship between interpretive schemata and textual features to ask if there are in fact any necessary conditions for interpretations of performance, or if a resolutely impressionistic vocabulary in fact allows anyone to say anything about any performance.  Finally, the last chapter of the thesis suggests that when none of the reviewing or critical machines address a particular representation, when no interpretation of a textual presence is offered, that presence is rendered peculiarly absent.  It is, in fact, very difficult to talk about a presence when the necessary interpretive schemata to do so, do not exist.

# Chapter C.1: Realism

## C.1.1

Evan Williams, in reviewing *The Fringe Dwellers* (Bruce Beresford, 1986)
compares the film unfavourably with an earlier film, *Wrong Side of the Road*
(Ned Lander, 1985). His dissatisfaction with the former comes from its failure
to live up to the standards set by the latter. The earlier piece was, he states:

> ...as rough as a smoker's throat after an all-night party. It was a scruffy little
> piece, loosely scripted, acted mainly by amateurs and shot in black and white
> [sic]. But from first to last, it quivered with truth. It was full of raw anger
> and pain...[and] uncompromising realism. The Aboriginal characters were
> not the smiling, quaintly picturesque and happy-go-lucky folk we might
> prefer them to be, but miserable battlers, petty crims, boozers, unemployed
> drifters - pathetic victims of a white man's society (Evan Williams, 1986).

By contrast, Williams says of *The Fringe Dwellers*, 'the futility and
desperation...is somehow missing here'. Partly, Williams here invokes an
idea of 'documentary realism', of textual features such as a loose script and
unprofessional performance guaranteeing the authenticity of the pro-filmic
event. But more than this, the 'reality' which he wants to see in films about
Aboriginality is that which is related to the negative aspects of life. For this
reviewer, the 'truth' about Aborigines 'quivers' — whether with *delirium
tremens* or fear of the police is not clear. The 'truth' shows 'miserable battlers'
and not 'happy-go-lucky folk'. 'Realism' is about anger and pain and boozers
and unemployment and pathetic victims. *The Fringe Dwellers*, he implies, is
compromised — is not *realistic* — because the image it presents is simply not
depressing enough.

This interpretive schema — a way of making sense of a text by proclaiming its
degree of 'realism', and calculating that realism from the presence of
'negative' elements in the text — is a common and a powerful one in
journalistic writing about Australian Aboriginality. This chapter suggests the

implications of the term 'realism', the conditions necessary for its mobilisation in describing a text, and the ways in which such readings limit understandings of Aboriginality in Australia.


## C.1.2

As was noted in Chapter B.1, the dominant genres in the audio-visual representation of Australian Aboriginality have been those which are understood to be non-fictional. The documentary, the news report, the ethnographic film, and to some degree, the social-realist fiction film are the numerically most important forms for representing the Aboriginal.

These genres have been linked under a rubric of 'realism'. Tracey Moffatt suggests that: '[i]t's as though Aboriginal people could never be represented in any other way than the realist text' (Moffatt, quoted in Fairleigh, 1987: 13), while Christos Tsiolkas notes that: 'Aboriginality in Australian film has been largely defined within the documentary and the social realist genres' (Tsiolkas, 1994: 22).

This 'realism' has indeed been a dominant concern in representations of Aboriginality; but rather than being simply a textual feature, a mark of particular genres, realism is a conceptual schema, a way of making sense of films and of television programs. Karen Jennings believes that:

> Many studies of representations of ethnic minorities in Australia and overseas emphasise the accuracy of representations to 'real' events, locking themselves into an untenable reference to some empirically provable reality (Jennings, 1993: 43).

This tendency is a part of the reviewing process more generally, rather than simply being a concern of writing on Aboriginality. Colin McArthur has described the 'relentless bludgeoning' of every text with concerns as to how far reality has been 'captured' by a film or television program, whatever its stylistic mode (McArthur, 1980: 61). Such discourses of realism, and of presumed adequacy to the real, function as potent intertexts in the

interpretation of films: guides as to how they are to be understood, and arbiters of their value as social texts.


## C.1.3

That the calls for 'realism' in reviewing and criticism of Aboriginal representation are less concerned with particular textual features than a way of interpreting texts, becomes obvious from even the most cursory glance at the history of the term 'realism'. In writing on literary and filmic cultural production, realism does not imply particular textual features; or rather, it implies at various times most imaginable textual features, for realism has, it seems, functioned as a massively polyvalent term, able to denote all things to most people (Eagleton, 1980: 93). In Robert Flaherty's 'romantic realism', in Soviet cinema's 'expressive realism', John Grierson's 'documentary realism', or in Italian 'neo-realism', quite distinct textual features are insistently presented as being more 'realistic' than others (Tudor, 1972: 33-34). Documentary realism, for Dai Vaughan, is textually marked by signifiers as location shooting, graininess, verbal narration, wooden, rehearsed performances (from non-actors), hand-held camera, lapses of focus, imperfect continuity, and so on (Vaughan, 1992). By contrast, another filmic realism, 'classical realism', describes a text putatively structured so as not to allow contradictory subject positions for an audience (MacCabe, 1974), promoting instead unified understandings of texts. The textual concomitant of this project is that 'realist' texts cannot 'interrogate the conditions of representation' (MacCabe, 1976: 100). So, classical realism is characterised by a lack of self-reflective devices; while the documentary realism cited above is characterised by precisely those self-reflexive devices which draw attention to the actuality of what appears in front of the cameras.

Similarly, Colin MacCabe, writing from an avowedly Marxist viewpoint, finds that classical realist texts cannot deal with contradictions: they can 'state a contradiction which has already been resolved', but not 'produce a contradiction which remains unresolved and is thus left for the reader to resolve and act out' (MacCabe, 1976: 100). In contrast, Georg Lukacs, another writer whose work is explicitly Marxist in orientation, champions the realist

literary production of his own country with the claim that the realist text is
characterised by its ability to reveal the dialectic nature of social relations
(Lukacs, 1980).

Realism has been associated with textual features such as 'continuity' and
'lapses of continuity'; self-conscious performances, and performances which
aim not to draw attention to themselves; with jump cuts and with continuity
editing.  Edward Buscombe, Christine Gledhill et al, suggest that in the
tradition of *Screen*-theory, 'realism' is a general term of abuse, aimed at all
production that appears to be ideologically conservative (Buscombe, Gledhill
et al, 1976: 108); while Andrew Tudor notes that for less academically-inclined
film criticism, the term 'realism' is 'a de facto substitute for "highly valued"'
(Tudor, 1972: 28).

In light of these variegated debates about realism, it seems uncontroversial to
suggest that McArthur be taken seriously in his call for a discussion not of
realism, but of 'Realisms' (McArthur, 1975/76: 143).  The term becomes a
historical label applied to film movements; rather than a word describing the
adequacy of a text to external events.  In the contemporary situation, the use
of the term in, particularly journalistic, discourses as a way of describing
representations of Aboriginality in film and television, should be understood
as being more an interpretive strategy — asserting perceived desirability of
particular images — than a meaningful comment on textual form.  As
Andrew Jakobson argued as long ago as 1921, a work is realistic if the person
judging the work considers it to be 'a truthful depiction of reality' (quoted in
Paul Willemen, 1972: 37).


## C.1.4

In the body of approaches in both film and literature which have borne the
label 'realism', it is difficult to find any continuity of textual features.  It is
possible to suggest, however, a certain unity of project.  In order to celebrate a
text as 'realistic' either as producer or reviewer, it is necessary to hold a belief
in an empirically observable 'real'.  It is then possible to engage in those
'traditional debates about realism [which] have centred on content, and the
ability to reflect reality' (MacCabe, 1976: 98).  The prescriptions of much

theoretical writing on realism have involved judgements of worth of a given text depending on how easily that text can be read in a way which is congruent with the writer's own perception of reality.  Such perceived 'realities', in writing about 'realism' have included Marxist doctrines of dialectics, the reality of the perceptive artist, and the authenticity of poverty and suffering.  In traditional high art theory, and Lukacs' version of Marxist realist theory, there is a similar demand that texts should lay bare what mortals cannot see (Christopher Williams, 1981: 79).  Whether the author is an artistic genius (Williams finds examples in the work of Andre Bazin, Victor Perkins, Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov; Williams, 1981: 35, 79), or a perceptive Marxist intellectual (Lukacs, 1980: 53), he [sic] has a vision of reality which is not apparent to the proletarian eyes of those who see only surface appearances.  The texts produced by this artist must reveal this reality; this is realism.  The distinction is that of Bazin, between reportage (a naturalistic form, presenting only the 'fetishistic' details of surface appearance); and realism (which reveals 'the essential and driving forces'; Lukacs, 1980: 53).  Merely reproducing surface detail is not 'realism', 'realism' involves the congruence of texts with perceived social truths (see Lenin, quoted in Lukacs, 1980: 72; and Brecht, quoted in Editors of *Screen*, 1972: 2).


## C.1.5

The project of this work, then, is to describe those discourses of realism which journalistic reviewing practices have circulated around representations of Australian Aboriginality.  Understanding the ways in which newspaper reviews of particular films have validated them as realistic, or condemned them as being not realistic, helps to explain the ways in which 'real' Aboriginality is understood and reproduced: even by those Australians who have never met an Aboriginal person socially.

Looking at the language which has been used in describing filmic Aboriginality begins to suggest certain qualities which must be present before the reviewer will begin to describe a text as realistic:  it should be contemporary, for example (*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is not described as 'realistic'); it should deal with what are recognised as 'social issues'; it should

not be obviously affiliated to any of a range of recognisable genres, such as comedy (*Crocodile Dundee* is not 'realistic'), musical (*Black River*), or horror film (*Kadaicha*). But in considering the contours of 'realism', perhaps the most obvious axis of discrimination is one which could crudely be described as 'negative' and 'positive' images.

As will be explored in the next chapter, these terms have particular meanings in the history of both journalistic and academic writings about racial representation in Australia. A 'positive' image is understood to imply representations of success in the terms of white culture, and more particularly, the material elements of white culture; 'positive' elements would be education, middle-class identity, wealth, materialism, business acumen and 'taste'. By contrast, 'negative' representations would involve aspects of life which fail to live up to white bourgeois standards of success; poverty, drunkenness, swearing and public brawling, lack of concern for material property, and so on. These terms are not, of course, used prescriptively, but rather to note particular groups of characteristics which have been repeatedly invoked in discussing Aboriginality.

## C.1.6

Such an equation — that negative images are more realistic — is a common one in writing about race. In a South African context, Robert Grieg states that: 'A South African made film with murder, rape, attempted patricide, suicide and an atmosphere of blood-letting seems to get the undeserved reputation of being realistic' (quoted in Keyan Tomaselli, 1988: 110). More generally, the history of the term 'realism' has tied in with such negative qualities. Raymond Williams finds that one part of the term's etymology has been an equation of being 'realistic', with being 'practical' — acknowledging the limitations or difficulties of a situation. By contrast, not to acknowledge negative aspects of a situation is to be 'escapist' (Raymond Williams, 1981: 219). Similarly, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of literacy* uses the term 'authenticity' to provide a logical link between reality and working class culture: validating particular qualities of working class life ('vitality'; 'energy') as being particularly 'real' (Hoggart, 1958: 324). Such a use of the term denies

the possibility of connections between 'the real', and comfort, middle-classness — the 'positive' qualities of western culture. This more general understanding of realism as involving negative qualities has certainly informed the interpretive structures brought to bear on representations of Aboriginality in Australia.

The writing around James Ricketson's *Blackfellas* (1993) is instructive in this matter. Centring on the experience of urban Aborigines in Western Australia, the film deals with unmarried motherhood, theft, drug-dealing, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, imprisonment, corrupt policing, and finally murder.

It should be noted, though, that the film also, through the centring of Aboriginal actors, allows for more hopeful readings of community solidarity, cultural continuity and choices for the future. Despite such possibilities, it cannot be overstated how little of such hope was communicated in reviews of the film. The 'narrative image' of the text, as circulated in the discourses of journalistic reviews, is insistent in its presentation of 'negative' characteristics: and celebratory of the 'realism' of these images.

Raymond Gill interviews James Ricketson (white), under the headline, 'Film just a glimpse into Aboriginal life', allowing the director to claim that the film 'presented life as it is' (Gill, 1993: 29). For Ivan Hutchinson, *Blackfellas* 'takes white Australians into the world of Aboriginal people with...surprising honesty' (Hutchinson, 1993). In *The Age EG magazine* an anonymous commentator states that :'The film is as frank about race as its name implies, and is vividly honest in its group portrait of Aborigines trapped between two cultures' (Anon, *EG* 1993: 5). In an interview with Julietta Jameson, David Ngoombujarra claims: 'that's what its realistically like in Perth' (Jameson, 1993: 17). In the anonymous article on *'Blackfellas* Awarded' in the *Age*, Father F M Chamberlain, in awarding the film the Australian Catholic Film Office Award, states that: *'Blackfellas* is a realistic...portrait of urban Aborigines' (quoted in Anon, 'Arts Diary', 1993: 1). For Lynn Barber, the film's relationship to the real is expressed in her comment that it is: 'reflecting the contemporary experience of urban Aborigines' (Barber, 1993).

At the same time as these reviews insist on the film's adequacy to reality, they work strongly to insist that anything traditionally understood as a 'positive' image is unrealistic. In listing the good points about the film, Barber includes the fact that: '[i]ts characters variously drink, spend time in jail, steal cars and deal in stolen VCRs' (Barber 1993). This is all seen as realistic; in contrast, Barber throws up an imaginary group of texts and of misguided left-wingers, who would show only 'positive' representations: the film displays 'authenticity' because it 'never pussyfoots around for fear of transgressing zealous notions of political correctness' (Barber, 1993). 'Political correctness' is a term employed with reactionary intent in order to imply that 'they' want to stop people telling the 'truth', by making positive representations compulsory. To 'pussyfoot' is to tread overly carefully, to 'pussyfoot around' is to avoid a central issue — the truth about Aboriginality — by means of euphemisms and excuses. Similar accolades, and in similar terms, are accorded the film by Stephanie Bunbury. In acclaiming it, she states that 'there is nothing worthy or self-consciously correct about *Blackfellas'* (Bunbury, 1993: 49). Again, Bunbury is validating the film for showing negative (realistic) social aspects, as opposed to the false image that a '[politically] correct' film might show.

## C.1.7

'Realistic' is not only a term of validation; it also suggests that this is what Aboriginal life is 'really' like. Murder, drugs, death, this is what constitutes Aboriginal experience: 'happy-go-lucky', carefree lives are unrealistic (this is not what constitutes Aboriginal life). In mobilising this term, Aboriginality is constricted as much as are interpretations of the films. This is no longer a fictional text. It is rather a documentary, a news program, an instructional piece, which provides not entertainment but validated information about the present reality of Aboriginal life in Australia. Its generic status is validated as having a particularly close relationship with the real.

The media in Australia provide many Australians with their only source of information about Aborigines. For the vast majority of settler Australians it would be fair to say that newspapers, television and films provide most of

their knowledge on the subject. Generic status is relevant in deciding on the ways in which the information provided in texts is to be applied to wider social situations. 'Non-fictional' genres — current affairs, news, documentaries, educational materials — are seen to provide socially relevant information. Claims of 'realism' in reviews of these films suggest that the information about Aboriginal people in texts such as *Blackfellas* might be accorded a similar status. Paddy McGuinness, for example, in reviewing another film, suggests that *The Fringe Dwellers* is 'an important social documentary' (McGuinness, 1986), a generic label which clearly marks a privileged relationship to reality. Evan Williams aligns that same film generically as a 'study' (Williams, 1986), again suggesting a status as information. Of *Blackfellas*, an anonymous reviewer claims that the film 'should be seen and inwardly digested by all Australians', implying that the piece should be granted the status of an educational tool (Anon, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 1993: 59). Similarly, the terminology used by Judy Stone — '*The Fringe Dwellers* is a fascinating introduction to an ancient people' (Stone, 1987) — implies academic sources of information. These interpretive approaches, those whose insistence on realism extends to awarding films the status of being information, imply particular uses for these texts.

Another implication of those conceptual schemata which insist on the 'realism' of a text is the way in which such discourses necessarily privilege the reading being made by the reviewer. If a reading of a film accords with the reviewer's perception of reality, the interpretation offered immediately closes down other possible readings as irrelevant. For a writer to use a terminology of 'realism' implies on their part an understanding of, and an investment in, 'the real'. If this is the case, it is a necessary requirement of this 'reality' that it be singular and all-present. If a film is read as 'realistic', there can then be no other correct 'realistic' reading of that same text. Other readings, those which do not claim to be realistic must be secondary, must somehow miss the point of the text's proximity to reality — for reality is, of necessity, primary: it is not simply another reading, for it is real.

Another necessary component of reading as real is generalisation. This process is a logical part of interpretations which claim to find films 'realistic' in terms of social groups rather than specific individuals. Writers claiming 'realism' are not suggesting accuracy in representations of specific Aboriginal

individuals: rather, they want to read from films images of 'Aboriginality' as a category; of Aborigines as a general group. To say that a character is like a specific person of the spectator's knowledge is not realism, but recognition. 'Realism' means that an interpretation says, more generally, yes, Aboriginal life is like that.

## C.1.8

The case of *Blackfellas* is an obvious one. Readings of the film focus on negative aspects, celebrate these as realistic, and thus institute for the film a regime of consumption in which these representations are validated as information, to be read as an accurate portrayal of a fictional construct called Aboriginal experience.

The examples of other films, those whose material is less insistently associated with 'negative' experiences, is instructive for being more complex. *The Fringe Dwellers*, for example, can be dismissed by Evan Williams as unrealistic for its portrayal of 'happy-go-lucky folk'; but at the same time, it is open to being read as realistic; and in ways which, typically, focus on the 'negative' experiences of the characters in the film. A review of the film in the *Sunday Mail* , for example, headlines with 'Aborigines and the way things are' (Anon, *Sunday Mail*: 1987), and finds that: 'the film lays bare the problem of Aboriginals'; Michael O'Regan believes that the film: 'shows things the way they are and leaves the judgements to the audience' (O'Regan, 1987); while for P P McGuinness, it is: 'one of the most truthful and direct accounts of the real state of the deprived sectors of the Aboriginal community in Australia...telling the truth about racism in Australia' (McGuinness, 1986: 51).

As can be seen in McGuinness' remarks, once again the degree to which the film can reasonably be described as 'realistic' is that to which it represents the Aboriginal experience in negative terms ('deprived sectors...the truth about racism'). This is more explicit in comments by Neil Jillett, for example, where he finds of *The Fringe Dwellers* that: 'the film's greatest strength' is showing that 'failure and despair, not hope and success, are the keys to their [presumably, Aborigine's] existence'. Similarly, Peter Haran, reviewing the film, links the vocabulary of realism to the negative aspects of the film: 'it

tackles with a brutal truthfulness racism and poverty...This is shanty life with all its inherent misery and peopled with no-hopers' (Haran, 1986).

Textually, however, *The Fringe Dwellers* is generically diffuse in a way that is not true of *Blackfellas*. Sequences of the film are marked as belonging to genres which are not regarded as realistic: for example, when the Comeaway's move house, the segment seems to be presented as comedy; while Trillby's murder of her child is generically composed as an instance of horror. By comparison, *Blackfellas* is consistently marked as a social issue/urban jungle film, much more easily described as realistic. The reviews of the two films illustrate the way in which these differing textual features interact with discourses of realism, to reinforce understandings of the negative as more real than the positive.

In writing about *The Fringe Dwellers*, several reviewers note aspects of the film which are either 'positive', or identified as generic (the two ideas are linked in the term 'gentle comedy', which seems a suitable one to use in describing at least segments of this film). In none of the writing invoking such generic schemata do the keywords of realism appear. For example, Ivan Hutchinson describes the film in terms of a pair of opposites: while it 'lacks strength' (that is, truth, realism, honesty, and so on), it is 'generally worthwhile entertainment' (Hutchinson, 1986); Frank Ashboth notes that 'the most memorable scene is when the Comeaways move, trundling through the main street of the town in a clapped out old truck'. Privileging a scene which seems to be marked as primarily comic (and also upbeat: it is a family event, everyone is together), it would then be difficult for Ashboth to comment on the film in terms of 'realism'. Rather, for him it is 'A gentle [the term does not suggest 'realistic'] story of a family' (Ashboth, 1987). Again, his review does not employ any of those terms which cluster around 'realistic' readings. Similarly, when the anonymous reviewer of the *Daily Sun* describes the film in positive terms — 'Beresford's film is a warm-hearted study of a family' — s/he does not then find it necessary to discuss its relation to the presumed reality of Aboriginal experience.

These comments again illustrate the nature of realism as a function of reading: *The Fringe Dwellers* is realistic, or not realistic; it is honest and truthful, or it is gentle and entertaining: what does not alter across the

reviews, whichever interpretation they make of the text, is the correlation of examples given to substantiate arguments. If the film is realistic, or any of the associated terms which imply this complex of ideas (honest, truthful), then it is so because it deals with the negative issues that are perceived to relate to Aboriginal experience. By contrast, if it is not realistic, then it is described as positive, warm, entertaining, and as explicitly generic (comic scenes are singled out as representing the film as a whole).

## C.1.9

To write of a film as 'realistic' has tended to involve claiming certain knowledge of correct interpretations. The difficulties implied in this approach can be seen in the case of *The Fringe Dwellers*. Two commentators on this film, both claiming to know 'reality', and thus to control interpretations of its relationship with reality, are PP McGuinness and Bobbi McHugh. In comparing their comments on the film, the implications of readings as real can be traced out. For the act of claiming access to 'the real', and of mobilising films to buttress such interpretations of social experience, is an aggressive one. As suggested above, there can only be one 'reality'. A reviewer, in producing an interpretation of a film, and claiming that interpretation accords with reality, is refusing validity to the work of other readers. Another reviewer, disagreeing about that interpretation, or that reality, must, perforce, be wrong.

In a (post) colonial situation, as Edward Said has made clear, the possession of knowledge is a mark of power, and is involved in its very production. In the case of 'Aboriginalism', indigenous Australians have been the continual subject of white scientific knowledges, unable fully to know themselves (see Attwood and Arnold, [eds], 1992). Against such a background of institutional situations in which white observers have claimed to know Aborigines better than the Aborigines knew themselves, for a contemporary reviewer to make the claim of understanding Aboriginality which is contained in the confident discovery of 'realism' is certainly a confrontational act. In the case of *The Fringe Dwellers*, debates about the 'realism' or otherwise of the film feed into,

and work within, these attempts to control knowledge of the real more generally.

That the opposing claims that have been made about the real involve a striving for power is obvious in the 'controversy' which this film instituted. Paddy McGuinness claims that: '[a] campaign of slander has already been mounted [against the film]', (McGuinness, 1986). Three Aboriginal delegates at Cannes walked out of a screening of the film (Bail, 1986: 17); and Bobbi McHugh, 'an administrator at an Aboriginal visual and performing arts centre...claimed that [*The Fringe dwellers*] had set Aboriginal rights back 200 years' (Bail, 1986: 17). To describe reactions to the film as a 'controversy' seems to be somewhat overstating the issue. Kathy Bail introduces the term in her article, but it is in fact difficult to find aggressive attitudes towards the film; most writing expressing sentiments more in tone with the text's own warm sentimentality. Still, the term 'controversy; does accurately convey what is at stake in writing about this film. As suggested above, certain aspects of the text render it available for readings in terms of 'realism' (death, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, racism, drunkenness); while at the same time, some sequences are rendered as explicitly generic. The presence of both sets of markers opens up debate in precisely the terms: is this a 'realistic' representation of Aboriginality, in the terms normally instated by the journalistic invocation of that term?

The pugilistic tone both of defenders and detractors is instructive. On one hand, Bob Merritt presents the view of an Aboriginal reader who feels that the film is dangerous: 'It didn't have a soul because there was no underlying truth' (Bob Merritt, quoted in Bail, 1986: 16). To the unstated question as to what then this 'truth' would look like, of what representations would be adequate to the real, Merritt states that: 'Aboriginal people are great interpretive artists...but this isn't evident in *The Fringe Dwellers*...Aboriginal people get excited over the natural things in life' (quoted in Bail, 1986: 17). For Merritt's argument to work, it is necessary a series of conditions must fulfilled. On the one hand, he needs a strong personal understanding of what 'reality' is: here, Aborigines who do not get excited over the natural things in life are excluded from his scheme, for they are less real. Secondly, Merritt needs a firm belief that film can adequately represent that reality. Thirdly, he must believe that he knows the way in which the majority of audiences will

interpret the film. Merritt's reading is indeed made in terms of realism: he can imagine a film which would be 'realistic', one which would have 'underlying truth'. He has no reservations about the mediated nature of filmic discourses. They could, he imagines, be adequate to the real. His anger at *The Fringe Dwellers* comes because he cannot read it in terms of his perception of that reality. No negotiation is possible: the film should therefore be dismissed. It does not have 'truth'.

Arguing in the same terms, and equally aggressively, Paddy McGuinness produces an interpretation of the film's realism suitable for the more reactionary site of the *Financial Review*. He finds the film perfectly open to readings of which he approves, and which prove congruent with his view of reality. The film is, for him, realistic. His article, '*The Fringe Dwellers* — an honest look at the Aboriginal culture of poverty' (McGuinness, 1986: 51) provides an interesting example of the ways in which discourse of the real can be mobilised. The reality which Patrick McGuinness sees *The Fringe Dwellers* as illustrating is a casually racist one: he promotes, for example, a form of racist 'non-racism' (Hall, 1981), whereby those demanding rights for Aborigines are labelled 'inverted racists'; as though simply by denying that race were an issue would this become true. McGuinness also presents a diatribe against Aboriginal land rights which entirely misses the political dimension of the protest, stating that:

> While it is perfectly true that Europeans occupied Australia without the consent of its Aboriginal occupants...it does not follow that every claim made for compensation for this past wrong is now justified... (McGuinness, 1986: 51)

Again, this article contains a typically racist comment on the components of Aboriginal identity, for example asserting biology as determining personality; linked to typical redneck fears that Aborigines get life too easy ('the provisions for Australian Aborigines are too generous in that they extend to many people who are not in any real sense Aborigines at all'). And, eventually: 'The true problem facing many Aborigines', McGuinness asserts: 'is not racism at all...but the culture of poverty...extended families...are a major barrier to...upward mobility' (McGuinness, 1986: 51).

In making an interpretation which foregrounds the negative elements of poverty and despair, McGuinness is free to invoke a schema of 'realism':

> ...the true state of affairs is clearly pointed to in Mr Beresford's film...one of the most truthful and direct accounts of the real state of the Aboriginal community in Australia...represents a major contribution to setting the record straight, to telling the truth about racism in Australia...an important social documentary (McGuinness, 1986: 51).

That this insistence on realism occurs in the article which also contains the most explicit and aggressive belief in a single 'truth' about social reality is not coincidental. The writing of McGuinness illustrates the way in which insisting on a film as 'realistic' implies a well-understood sense of the real to which the text can be linked. In the case of McGuinness, the reactionary nature of the reality he perceives in modern Australia merely draws attention to this process. That the writer believes his interpretation of contemporary society to be the only correct one cannot be doubted. He explicitly rails against those who disagree with him, the mythically politically-correct, those 'inverted racists' who would seek to discriminate against the good honest white man such as McGuinness himself. Similarly, there is no doubt in this article that *The Fringe Dwellers* can be only interpreted in one way. Those who have mounted the campaign of slander are not allowed any validity in their interpretation of the film: McGuinness takes it as read that they must have interpreted the film as he has — arguing that Aborigines do not face racism — but cannot admit to such an unpalatable 'truth'. If those who disagree with him did not make such an interpretation, it would seem, they must be wrong.

McGuinness and Merritt illustrate not only the investment that comes in deciding who may describe Aboriginal experience, but also the implications of bringing to bear discourses of realism in the interpretation of film texts. To assert realism is to claim territories both of interpretation and of social experience — to insist on univocal understandings of both reality and of the texts which illustrate it.

# Chapter C.2: Fantasy

## C.2.1

In those interpretive schemata employed by reviewers to produce readings of films about Aboriginality, negative elements are to be foregrounded and classified together as 'realistic'. Concomitantly such reviewing practices dismiss 'positive' representations as unrealistic, escapist, as fantasy. This approach to reviewing films is reinforced by academic writings on race and representation. The interpretive work of both film reviewers and film critics works to devalue representations which might be called 'positive', those which involve Aboriginality succeeding in various aspects of dominant white culture, whether material, social or educational. The dislike of 'positive images' in critical writing buttresses the thoughtless dismissal of 'political correctness' in journalistic work, producing ways of reading films which leave little space for validating texts of 'positive' Aboriginality.

## C.2.2

*Jindalee Lady* (Syron, 1992) is described in publicity handouts as the first feature film in Australia to be directed by an Aboriginal person[1]. The film tells the story of Lauren, a successful Aboriginal fashion designer and business woman. Discovering that her (white) husband is being unfaithful to her, she leaves him, although pregnant with his child. She gives birth, but the baby later dies. Going on with her career, which becomes increasingly successful, her new (Aboriginal) lover encourages her to avow her Aboriginal heritage more strongly.

Generically, the film could be categorised as a melodrama, as a woman's film, a love story, or even a weepie, and an awareness of such alignments must be mobilised if the film is to make sense. Certainly, it bears little

relation to other filmic representations of the Aboriginal, and if attempts are made to compare it to *Blackfellas* or *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, little congruence will be found; those films do not suggest useful ways of approaching it as a 'film about Aboriginality'.

The industrial history of the film's production, a history which has become public knowledge as newspaper stories, suggests the uncomfortable position of *Jindalee Lady*, as a 'positive image' of Aboriginality: a representation of indigenous Australians which shows success in the most material aspects of white culture. The film has, in 1995 and three years after its completion, not yet been released theatrically, or even on video in Australia. It was not funded through typical monetary channels. Indeed, most of the finance for the film was raised privately, including mortgages taken out by production personnel. The producers approached the Australian Film Commission for postproduction funding, which was initially refused. Following a complaint to the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Commission, however, this decision was reversed, and the AFC further initiated steps to ensure that Aboriginal people would be involved in the decision-making process about films with Aboriginal subjects (this had not previously been the case). At every stage, this film of 'positive, successful images where there were no victims...' (Syron, 1993: 168) was excluded from the typical institutions of film production in Australia; those institutions which produced *Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, The Fringe Dwellers* and *Blackfellas*.

This chapter deals with the way that dominant reviewing practices of realism have limited the ways in which such films can be discussed. As a film which does not present the images of crime, poverty or violence which are validated by this term, *Jindalee Lady* does not allow readings which would assert its 'realism'. Any interpretation made within such a framework must necessarily denigrate the film as unrealistic fantasy. Historically, though, with a certain sensitivity to the production situation, such conceptual schemata have been altogether avoided. *Jindalee Lady* is neither celebrated as realist, nor condemned as unrealistic. In fact, the film has not been reviewed at all, in Australia at least. It has never been distributed theatrically in Australia, and special one-off screenings seem not to have generated reviews. In the case of film criticism, the academic

conference circuit generates a feeling of uninterest in the film. This uninterest, both of the interpretative machines, and of production institutions such as the AFC, is telling.

The refusal of the AFC to supply post-production funding, for example, seems surprising in light of the fact that the production had been, until that point, privately funded, and would have been a relatively cheap investment. That a project, directed by an Aboriginal man, and largely applauded by the Aboriginal community (Hewett, 1991a; Syron, 1992) should be turned down at this stage by non-Aboriginal AFC workers, without any consultation with Aboriginal groups, shows a certainty and an unconcern which has little interest in the images of the film. Even in the worst interpretation, this was an opportunity for the Commission to make a gesture, supporting Aboriginal production at no great risk to itself. The fact that such an opportunity was passed up is suggestive.

It must also be emphasised that *Jindalee Lady* is not a 'bad' film. It is true that it does not have high-budget production values (photography, lighting, symphonic score) — necessarily so, as it was shot for around $30,000. The script is not literary; that is a generic choice. As an example of a melodramatic love story, it is an enjoyable experience. The AFC has certainly funded worse films.

The fact that the film so entirely failed to make any impression is telling: especially when compared to the critical feeding frenzy that surrounded James Ricketson's 1993 film *Blackfellas*, and the hyperbolic reviews occasioned by that film's perceived realism. It may well be that *Jindalee Lady* is in fact too soapy for Australian reviewers. It seems that its self-proclaimed project to provide a 'glamorous' version of Aboriginality (Shelley, 1990: 15) is not an attractive one to the fundholders, distributors and reviewers of a country where documentaries about Aboriginal deaths and maltreatment remain the focus of serious-faced newspaper articles for months on end (the documentary *Black Man's Houses*, also with no general cinematic release, sparked reviews and related articles for several weeks on its completion in mid-1992, for example). By contrast, the story of a strong, beautiful and successful Aboriginal woman, who falls in love with an Aboriginal man, acknowledges her heritage, and launches a

successful line of designer clothes, is of little interest for journalists. It is not realistic. The interpretive schemata to make sense of this film without denigrating it simply do not exist in the discourses of film reviewing.

### C.2.3

'Realism', as outlined above, is understood by professional film critics, to comprise a series of images, all of undesirable but inescapable elements of culture. Obviously, however, this is not the only possible definition of the word. Taking MacCabe's 'classical realism', the attempts of *Jindalee Lady* to textually resemble Hollywood film production would allow the film to be described as 'realism' (if not 'realistic'). From another perspective, a text could be assigned a status as 'realistic' simply by recourse to appeals to 'the real' — being buttressed by statistics, or other generically non-fictional representations.

In relation to this latter strategy, it is interesting that in those spaces where Aboriginal audiences are given space to state what they would like to see of themselves on film and television, just such appeals to a different 'real' are made to promote a different concept of 'realism'. In Lester Bostock's *From the Dark Side*, a series of focus groups in urban, suburban and rural areas provide details of elements they would like to see on the media. One of his respondents, for example, is angry that news and documentaries focus on drunken and violent Aborigines. By contrast with these 'negative' images, s/he calls for: 'programs that deal realistically with Aboriginal life today, anything based on truth' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 16). In an even more direct equation, another respondent wants: 'the real truth, the positive stuff' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 29). In short, these Aboriginal audiences suggest a new interpretive schema: one where images of happy, well adjusted, hardworking Aborigines (to pull a few antonyms from the common list of 'negatives') are to be understood to be 'realistic'.

Each individual's experience of the real is, of course, subjective. For the Aboriginal people speaking in Bostock, people whose experience of

everyday Aboriginal existence may have little to do with poverty, urban
rioting or violence, these things are less real than the 'positive' images
they would like to see.  It is interesting, then, that none of the reviewers
who applaud *Blackfellas* for its 'realism' are Aboriginal.  For them, their
judgements of what is 'real' for Aboriginal people are at best, second hand.
As the reviewer Evan Williams explicitly states in his review of *The
Fringe Dwellers*:

> I confess I'm not authority on the way black people live.  But from what I've
> seen and read, their shanty towns and riverside humpies are more likely to be
> much more squalid and wretched places than they seem here, and I would be
> surprised if the people are as contented with their lot as Beresford makes
> them out to be...(Williams, 1986)

Similarly, James Ricketson, white director of *Blackfellas*, has defended his
focus on downbeat elements of Aboriginal experience by stating that it
would be dishonest to make films about Aboriginal doctors or lawyers
because that isn't real — suggesting that there simply aren't Aboriginal
doctors and lawyers in contemporary Australia (Ricketson, 1993).  This is
not the case.

In direct contrast to this conventional view of what is 'realistic',  Colin
McKinnon, from the Aboriginal Actor's Corporation 'Koori Access to
Television and Film' course, presents an argument that accords with
opinions of Bostock's respondents.  He: 'would like to see more
Aboriginal actors case in major roles as doctors, dentists or police officers.
"That's the true picture of Australia"' (Perera, 1995: 12).  Such discourses of
a 'positive' realism are also apparent around *Jindalee Lady*.  The film's
press synopsis states that:

> The major aim of this film is...[to offer] the chance for Aboriginals to view
> themselves, as in reality many of them are, as creatively and administratively
> successful members of Australia's multicultural society  (Anon, Synopsis,
> 1990).

Brian Syron, the director of the film, makes particular use of such
arguments:  'there are in fact, many, many successful indigenes who are
working towards goals no much different from those of the dominant

cultures in our society' (Syron, 1992); 'Let's not forget that I am depicting a generation where this is not just a dream, but it is a reality. There are designers out there' (Syron, 1993: 169). Again, speaking from a point of view where his everyday experience is not that shown in *Blackfellas*, Syron can perceive the story he is telling as realistic; for it is part of his reality: 'I live on a very middle-class level, and I make no bones about the fact that I'm a bourgeois black, or an uptown nigger. I am...' (Syron, 1993: 169)[2].

This is an alternative interpretive schema, one which has not been available to film reviewer, or to those who take up those reviews as interpretive schemata in approaching films about Aboriginality. Rather, the 'negative' elements insistently bear the charge of 'realism'; whatever arguments might be possible to the contrary, films like *Jindalee Lady* cannot be dismissed as 'realistic'. When Katherine Hackett, one of the few commentators on the film, wants to suggest that in 'reality', there are indeed Aborigines as successful in white society as the film suggests, she cannot easily use the terminology of realism: rather, she says that the film shows: 'a representation of Aboriginal people that is unusual in the mainstream media, although it is not an inaccurate or fanciful one...'(Hackett: 1993: 9). It is 'not inaccurate'. This is not the same as 'realistic', although the terms could be read in some contexts as roughly synonymous. To call *Jindalee Lady* 'realistic' would require a redefinition of that term as it is used in writing on Australian film.

What the comments from the Aboriginal viewers in Bostock, from the representative of Aboriginal actors, from the Aboriginal director of *Jindalee Lady*, what all of these comments make clear is a frustration at the current use of the term. Each one insists that stories about Aboriginal success, with happy endings, are 'realistic'; because in their own personal experiences, they know this to be the case. At this point in the thesis, as part of a project of attempting to reclaim that term, to modify its use, this thesis asserts that *Jindalee Lady* is a realistic film. Such a statement is not immediately comprehensible: but can be rendered as sensible as any other use of the term.

### C.2.4

As journalistic discourses have little space in their conceptual schema for embracing these 'positive images', so the approaches of film criticism have found it difficult to validate these images of Aboriginality.

The persistent use of scare-quotes about the terms 'positive' and 'negative' in this work is not simply a strategy to avoid the prescriptive implications of these word in everyday usage: it is also an acknowledgement of an, almost directly reversed set of value-judgements in academic writing.  In film criticism, the term 'positive image' is now used almost as a derogatory term.

Generally, the interpretive schemata brought to bear upon representations of race insists that the very division of images into positive and negative is an outmoded typology (Moore and Muecke, 1984: 37; Langton, 1993: 41; Jennings, 1993: 10).  Arguments about these terms insist that it is wrong to close down strategies of representation, that to insist on only those representations which are censored as positive is as dangerous as allowing only representations which have since been understood as 'negative'.  As Robert Stam and Louise Spence formulate this concern:

> A cinema dominated by positive images, characterised by a bending-over-backwards not-to-be-racist attitude, might ultimately betray a lack of confidence in the group portrayed, which usually itself has no illusions concerning its own perfection...The exact nature of 'positive...is somewhat relative: black incarnations of patience and gradualism, for example, have always been more pleasing to whites than to blacks...A cinema in which all black actors resembled Sidney Poitier might be as serious a cause for alarm as one  in which they all resembled Stepin Fetchit...(Stam and Spence, 1983: 9)

If this were indeed as far as academic approaches went, calling attention to the nature of what constitutes a 'positive' image and warning against institutions which would seek to censor the range of representations, the interpretive schema applied to films of race would not be a disabling one. However, this is not how the terms have been mobilised in criticism. Rather, this concern about the positive/negative typology has been collapsed into quite another issue: the dislike of 'positive images' per se.

In fact, internationally, academic writing has asserted that 'positive images' are to be interpreted, not as part of a dangerously rigid conceptual schema, but as a bad thing in themselves — because they are not 'really' black. In fact, academic writing in this area has in fact been quite dishonest. Much writing has, quite rightly, challenged the interpretive schema which seeks to categorise images as positive or negative (a schema which, indeed, takes little account of audience use of films, or of filmic specificity, the ways in which images may be configured and contextualised in quite different ways); and yet retains the right to invoke just this schema in order to assert that images are 'positive' and therefore bad, even dangerous, to black political projects. 'Positive' images, such as those of *Jindalee Lady*, those which portray an Aboriginality which is successful in the terms of Western materialist society, are open to being interpreted under these academic schema, as not really black, not really Aboriginal.

## C.2.5

The most obvious examples of this critical history of writing on race come not from Australia, but from critical writing in America and Britain on the Black representations of *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984). Academic writing asserting just this position — that 'positive' images are bad — offers schemata to journalistic reviewing, which then takes up similar positions. *The Cosby Show* presents an image of blackness which could, in outdated interpretive schemata, be understood as 'positive'. These representations are of healthy, wealthy, educated middle-class black men and women, who hold good, well-paid professional jobs. They are well-dressed and well spoken. They are avid consumers and have a materially-oriented lifestyle. They form a bourgeois family unit. This is the archetypal 'positive image'.

Critics of the program have not rejected this label and made interpretations of the show in other ways; rather, they have insisted on interpreting this as a 'positive image'; and have used this term to denigrate it.

Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, for example, claim that *The Cosby Show* presents 'positive images with a (neo-conservative) vengeance' (Julien and Mercer, 1988: 2); and although it: 'affords the pleasure of a basic or primary narcissism...it interpellates the minority subject...into ideological normalisation [of middle-classness]' (Julien and Mercer, 1988: 9). Keith Withall similarly, attacks the program: '*The Cosby Show*, which reproduces the mores of white, middle-class sitcoms, is miles away from the experience of the mass of black people' (Withall, 1990: 50). Terry Teachout finds that: 'the two oldest daughters are deracinated to an astonishing, even eerie, degree...one is already going to Princeton and summering in Paris; the other is a beige valley girl' (Teachout, 1986: 60). Shelby Steele claims that the program is 'a blackface version of the American dream' (quoted in Fuller, 1992: 121); and Lynn Norment finds that it is 'not black enough' (quoted in Fuller, 1992: 121).

Martha Bayles surveys writing on the program, and reproduces many more comments that make exactly this point — that middle-classness cannot be black. For example, *The Village Voice* claims that: 'Cosby no longer qualifies as black enough to be an Uncle Tom'; while *Newsweek* says that Cosby is a 'racial neuter...*Father Knows Best* in blackface' (quoted in Bayles, 1988: 28).

This, then, is the place of 'positive images' in American critical and journalistic writing. It is not the fact that this discursive arena has left behind the search for positive images, to find more sensitive and complex ways of making sense of race in these programs. As the case of *The Cosby Show* in America and Britain makes clear, critical writing is still keen to isolate these representations, still to label them as 'positive'; and to insist, with stultifying regularity, that these images are not really black.

In the comments quoted above, the concern is not that 'positive images' are taking over, to the degree that all other representations are excluded (although Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis do worry that this might be the case; 1992). Rather, each of the insults thrown at the program suggests that 'positive' images — those of materially successful, well-educated, and even, God help us, 'beige-skinned' blacks — are not 'really' black.

This assertion is demonstrably unhelpful.  To interpret *The Cosby Show* as a 'positive image', thus finding it be structurally white, and thus finding that the Cosby's are not really black, is simply to partake of a racist equation of blackness with poverty, suffering, authenticity; everything that makes up the 'realism' explored in Chapter C.1.  As Martha Bayles says of writing on this program:

> ...those who say that Cosby's sitcom family isn't black betray their own disturbingly narrow assumptions that blacks are...a collection of poverties, problems and pathologies...[denying black people] the chance to combine mobility with identity (Bayles, 1985: 28).

Jhally and Lewis address a similar point, asking groups of black and white viewers to comment on the program, and finding that black audiences have little problem in asserting the 'blackness' of the Cosby family, manifest in the 'mannerisms', the 'tone', the 'feeling', the 'slang' of the program: 'an accent that only black people would understand' (Jhally and Lewis, 1992: 54).

There is no need to insist, then, that 'positive images' are any less black, any less Aboriginal, than 'negative' (or, as they are more commonly interpreted, 'realistic') images.  Such equations are part of the same strategy as that described in Chapter A.2:  assertions of inauthenticity which guard the boundaries between cultures.  Aborigines who are rich, urban living, materially-oriented, are less authentic than bush-living cousins.  They are not 'really' Aborigines at all.

In this interpretive schema, then, that which is common in academically-oriented film and television criticism, as well as in reviewing practices, the typology 'positive'/'negative' images is preserved and held dear, so that any representation which may be found 'positive' can be labelled so, and even in the act of that labelling, in the sneer which the term now implies, dismissed as inauthentic, as not really black.

## C.2.6

As is suggested above, there is some concern that positive images are taking over (Stam and Spence, 1983: 9). This argument is an unconvincing one, certainly in the Australian situation. Surveying those images which have been produced of Aboriginality, even in the last decade, it is difficult to argue that 'positive' images are dominant to the extent that no others can be made.

It is certainly possible to trace a history of isolated examples of a 'middle-class' Aboriginality, as far back as 1918, and *The Enemy Within* (Ronald Stavely), a detective thriller which features Aboriginal boxer Sandy McVea as a be-suited sidekick to the hero. This figure occurs again, towards the end of cinema's first hundred years, appearing as Ernie Dingo in Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World* (1991), where this actor's private detective is similarly at home in a suit. Other isolated examples might include Rachel Maza playing a lawyer in *A Country Practice*, and Lydia Miller as a lawyer in *Heartland*. Apart from these few examples, though, the vast majority of Aboriginal representations are as traditionally-oriented individuals or groups, or as welfare recipients (sick and poor). If indeed the concern of academic criticism were that 'positive' images were taking over the world, such a history might stand as reassurance that this is not the case.

## C.2.7

The critical dismissal of 'positive' images can be detected working as part of the interpretive schemata brought to bear on Australian Aboriginal representations. Lynn Barber, in her review of *Blackfellas*, is explicit in her contempt for those who would show only 'positive' representations. As is noted in the previous chapter, she loves *Blackfellas* precisely because it: 'never pussyfoots around for fear of transgressing zealous notions of political correctness'. (Barber, 1993). There is, in contemporary Australian newspapers, a journalistic (and once again, common-sense) idea that there exists a powerful cultural elite attempting to enforce 'politically correct'

ideas of Aborigines (/women/gays); and that this 'politically correct' stance involves those representations which might otherwise be designated as 'positive images'. In another rhetorical move, these images, because they are supposedly enforced and immovable, are then denigrated as unreal; and those representations which would be labelled 'negative' become, once again, more realistic — this time, with an added kudos to the film-maker for daring to challenge these supposedly all-powerful cultural barons, and show things as they 'really' are, rather than as the politically-correct would claim them to be. Thus, *Jindalee Lady*, showing images that would be considered 'positive' is again unreal, because it is politically correct. Once again, the images of a successful Aboriginal character can be judged 'positive'; and thus found wanting.


## C.2.8

As noted above, the Aboriginal audiences cited in Lester Bostock's work insist on the importance of 'positive' images (Bostock, 1993: 13). The specific contours of this image can be traced from comments by individual respondents. One complains, for example, that television does not:

> give the impression that Aboriginal people live in cities, come from good
> homes and have good jobs, and are married to people from other cultures,
> and that they keep their own culture, shop at supermarkets, and drive cars
> (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 13).

There are also requests for programs which: 'show the good things of what Aborigines have done to improve their community (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 16); a desire to see: 'Aborigines being recognised for their sporting achievements' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 16); and images of: 'the urban Aboriginal who pays taxes own homes and have the same expenses as other Australians' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 19); for programs 'showing successful businesses owned and operated by Aborigines...also more of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders sports men and women' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 19). These quotations suggest an outline of what might be considered a 'positive' image for these Aboriginal respondents. They also begin to suggest why that image has proven unacceptable to many

academics. This unhappiness might be explored around the concept of assimilation.

The representations desired by Bostock's respondents do not constitute an assimilationist vision. Whereas assimilationist discourses require that entry to white culture can only be purchased by means of a repentance from Aboriginal identity, these contemporary ideas of 'positive' representation do not involve such a renunciation. As suggested above, an attractive image is seen to be that which shows Aboriginal people who: 'have good jobs...keep their own culture, shop at supermarkets and drive cars' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 13). Such a 'positive' image is one where Aboriginal people are active and successful participants in white life: but where they also 'keep their own culture'. This is not something which has been much represented in films and television. The possibility for Aboriginal people to retain indigenous identity, and to simultaneously function well in the dominant society — surely this must be, at least in some sense, 'positive'.

However, even accepting that such an Aboriginal representation is not necessarily assimilationist, it is still possible to understand that it might prove unattractive to middle-class white (radical) academics. This positive image appears to be largely a bourgeois vision; one where the 'positive' is equated with success in white culture; and, more than this, success in white culture is equated largely in material terms. So, it is owning a property in the suburbs, running a business, and paying taxes which form this positive image: a petit bourgeois existence which will be unattractive to many left-wing academics. Bourgeois life, capitalistic, materialistic life is bad; we know that.

It must also be emphasised that the history of attempted cultural genocide associated with assimilation policies in Australia is a horrific one. It is unsurprising that if 'positive images' are perceived to be part of this process they will be excoriated. However, as suggested above, this need not be the case. Positive images can rather be written into the history of recent, more apparently acceptable cultural policies: reconciliation, for example, or even independence. They merely show Aboriginal people

able to move in white culture, and to be successful in the terms dominant
in that culture.


## C.2.9

A similar understanding might be brought to the interpretation of so-
called 'negative images'.  For example, drunkenness is frequently pointed
to as an example of a 'negative image' of Aboriginality.  Bostock's
respondents, for example, are unhappy with  '[p]ictures of violent
drunken, abusive and uneducated Aborigines' (quoted in Bostock, 1993:
14); and with '[s]hots of drunken Aborigines in parks' (quoted in Bostock,
1993: 14); 'They show drunkenness and brawling of our community'
(quoted in Bostock, 1993: 19).

Academic work has, quite rightly, engaged with such comments,
demanding to know, who has the right to decide which images are
'negative'.  It is possible to argue that drunkenness on the part of
Aboriginal people can be interpreted as a political act, where, for example:

> [e]xcess, indulgence and wastefulness acted as effective statements of
> opposition to those European values which the Welfare Board sought to
> cultivate' (Barry Morris, 1988a: 52; see also, Andrew Lattas, 1993: 242).

But, to return to the comments of Stam and Spence, their concerns about
'positive images' being dangerous for limiting the possible range of
representations still seems to be more applicable to these 'negative'
representations.  Even after all of these years of academic disapproval, the
image of the drunken, ill-educated, unhealthy, socially maladjusted
Aborigine is the most common one across the fictional and non-fictional
genres of the media.  If one retains this interpretive schema, making sense
of images as 'negative' and 'positive', even with those scare quotes, it
must be acknowledged that there are still far more of the former than of
the latter.  Bostock's respondents often suggest that their concern is not
with images of drunken Aborigines per se; but with the fact that this is the
most common and insistently repeated image of Aboriginality in the
Australian media (Bostock 1993: 19).  Not only are Aborigines often

portrayed as drunken; but that this image is used in certain ways (implying victimhood and powerlessness). In short, it may be that the term 'negative' is referring as much to the dominance of images, and the way in which they are structured into generically typical news stories and documentaries, as to the subject matter involved.


### C.2.10

Historically, then, 'positive' images of Aboriginality have been interpreted by academics as a negative contribution to Australia's representation of race. This leads to the complicated situation where 'positive' and 'negative' can in fact be used interchangeably. The complexity of the terminology can be seen in the letter from Mr Pete Sainsbury, explaining the AFC's refusal to provide post-production funding to *Jindalee Lady*. He suggests that the application was unsuccessful as: 'it was felt that a major intention of the film to provide positive Aboriginal role models had been negated' (quoted in Hewett, 1991a: 15). As Brian Syron glosses this: 'The bureaucrats told me there were stereotypes in the film, negative images' (Syron, 1993: 170). This seems to be a fair comment based on Sainsbury's letter: to negate a positive role model, is to produce a negative one. Yet it is hard to see how *Jindalee Lady* fails to present 'positive Aboriginal role models'. The film shows Aboriginal characters who are materially successful, creatively fulfilled, powerful, attractive, and interested in exploring and retaining an Aboriginal cultural heritage. In fact, in dealing with a middle-class Aboriginality, the film presents an example of exactly that *Cosby-Show* 'positive image' which is understood by most academic and journalistic uses of the term. That 'positive image' is understood ironically, to be in fact, not 'positive'. This confusion is apparent in these comments.

As a side note, Justine Saunders, who was recruited as an Aboriginal commentator for the AFC's reassessment of the film's application, suggests that from her experiences, the first (male) panel were unhappy with the film because it showed an Aboriginal woman leaving a white man, denying her dependence on him, and becoming a single mother

(Hewett, 1991b). It may be that what was 'negative' about the film was its imbrication of race and gender into one powerful (and thus threatening) complex.


## C.2.11

So far in this chapter, the term 'fantasy' has been used only as an antonym in the structuring schema of realism — to be equated with escapism as 'not-realism'. However, to consider the work of 'positive images' as fantasy may help to explain their importance — even if they are not justified as 'realism'.

That cinema offers its audience fantasies is not a new idea. As used to describe films, the terms covers a range of meanings, from simple equations with day and night dreams, to sophisticated interpretations of cinema's relationship with Freud's phantasy. This whole range of equivalencies is evident in James Donald's book, *Fantasy and the Cinema* (1989). Hollywood, he states has been known as "the dream factory"...at least since the 1940's' (Donald, 1989: 3). Simultaneously, the term 'fantasy' has incurred negative connotations, suggestions that it is unreal, indeed that it is 'something imaginary, not grounded in reality' (Bormann: 1985: 5). But such an interpretation of the term is not particularly useful for understanding the work of cinema. It ignores the use value of fantasy: for fantasy does not exist outside of reality, but as a part of it. Janice Radway, investigating the use of romantic fiction, quotes Bruno Bettelheim to explain the importance of such fantasy work:

> ...while the fantasy is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us (quoted in Radway, 1984: 100)

In short, it is possible to justify the value of fantasy, even before considering wider social implications, in terms of feelings produced for an audience. To acknowledge such 'good feelings' is an important first step to understanding the social work, and the discursive productivity, of such cinematic texts. Beyond such purely emotional descriptions, though,

other important qualities can be offered by fantasies.  Richard Dyer
suggests that:

> Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or
> something that we want deeply, that our day-to-day lives don't provide.
> Alternatives, hopes, wishes — these are the stuff of utopia, a sense that
> things could be better, that something other than what is can be gained and
> maybe realised (Dyer, 1981: 177).

Fantasy, then, may offer alternative models for conceptualising the order
of things.  Can Aborigines be successful, glamorous businesspeople?  From
the images most often presented in Australian media, there is no need to
think so.  Indeed, unless you have personal experiences to the contrary,
you might imagine this absence was in fact representative.  *Jindalee Lady*
works against this lack; it makes visible, and makes credible such a role.
Generically, it may be termed fantasy, and this might limit the uses which
can be made of the text.  Interpretations may not demand that the world is
currently like this; but still, such images may become available as
possibilities; as hopes.  James Donald quotes Hortense Powdermaker
making just this point in the 1940's:

> One can escape into a world of imagination and come from it refreshed and
> with new understanding.  One can expand limited experiences into broad
> ones... (quoted in Donald, 1989: 3).

This is precisely the way in which Syron envisages his film being taken
up: 'the situation of Aborigines is fraught with social problems', Syron
says: 'I know that, but I don't necessarily want to depict that.  I want the
end of a film to be about hope...' (Syron, 1993: 170).

A fantasy may enter social reality as it offers possible visions of dreams or
hopes on which viewers can work.  In the case of *Jindalee Lady*, there is
one specific commonsense vocabulary which the producers introduce to
describe just such a process: that of 'role models'.  Through work as a role
model, an image maybe taken into material society.  It describes a process
whereby fantasy may be taken up and made to function in the service of
social life.  'The major aim of this film', states a press release for *Jindalee
Lady*, 'is to present a positive image...[which] will be a reinforcement of the

ability of Aboriginals to pursue and succeed in their chosen careers'
(Anon, Synopsis, 1990). This terminology, again, is one which is current
in wider Aboriginal commentaries. One of Lester Bostock's respondents
suggests that Aboriginal people need to see 'more positive stories so our
children will have role models to follow' (quoted in Bostock, 1993: 16).
But it is Brian Syron himself who most fully explores the implications and
possibilities of use value for films which present 'positive' images. The
film, he suggests:

> ...will show children who have been raised with negative images of their
> mothers and fathers and where they come from, positive images on screen.
> They'll see it's possible for them (Syron, quoted in Lewis, 1990: 18).

He goes on to explore the way in which he sees such 'fantasy' images as
entering the social realm:

> ...to bring about change in society, we must promote a variety of images, and
> most importantly, we must give to young Aboriginals an image of success...an
> image towards which they can aspire (Syron, 1992).

He finds, with a focus on the social use of films, that

> Indigenous people want their children, and their children's children, to grow
> up in a world where they are able to have their people playing the starring
> roles in the "Hollywood dream" of the dominant culture... (Syron, 1992);

Finally: 'films are about images...[Aboriginal children] didn't have
dreams' (Syron, 1993: 169).

That the availability of such fantasies can be in important part of material
culture has long been recognised in different disciplines. Timothy
Murray, for example, in his book entitled *Like a film*, finds that the
'fantasies' offered by media such as film suggest the ways in which it is
possible to talk about reality: that indeed, fantasy 'regulates social reality'
(Murray, 1993: 5). Ernest Bormann finds that 'shared group and
community fantasies are powerful factors in social live (Bormann, 1985: 3).

> ...the complete elimination of reality-transcending elements from our world
> would lead us to a "matter-of-factness" which ultimately would mean the

> decay of the human will...the disappearance of utopia brings about a static
> state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing
> (Mannheim, 1940: 236).

It is possible then, even if accepting a definition of *Jindalee Lady* as not
'realistic', to suggest that, as avowed fantasy, the film bears interesting
implications for social reality. In terms of role models, of the creation of
feelings such as hope, of the pleasure it offers, of the way it suggests and
makes visible alternative means of social organisation — in all of these
ways, fantasy is necessarily a part of reality — it is not an antonymic,
separate space.

## C.2.12

This work takes the example of *Jindalee Lady* to suggest that the insistence
on a 'realism' of 'negative images', in both film reviewing and criticism,
has left little interpretive space from which the images of a film such as
*Jindalee Lady* can be validated. These comments on fantasy suggest an
alternative interpretive schema, one which can be applied from within
the orthodox space of film theory, and yet produce readings which
embrace this film. No doubt the celebration of material success and
bourgeois lifestyles presented in this film will still prove difficult for
writers whose ideological inclinations are to condemn such capitalistic
desires. But for film theorists, seeking to make readings of entertainment
films, it is no longer necessary to deny the pleasures and use of these texts,
nor to decry them as homogeneously reactionary; at least, this is the case
when they are produced for white audiences. Such films can be read
redemptively, in abstract and in directly material historical ways. How is it
possible, then, for a critical project to suggest that Aborigines should be
denied such fantasy-material as these entertainment films? The insistence
on realism — the gritty, the depressing, the violent — as the preferred way
of representing Aboriginality seems to link directly to the arguments in
Chapter A.2 about banality. White writers have insisted that Aboriginality
works as some guarantee of authenticity in culture — living lives of

grittiness, hardness, fatality, which are so much more real than the pampered middle-class existences which we must guiltily endure.

### C.2.13

Ultimately, the terms 'positive' and 'negative' images must be retired. As an interpretive schema, such a way of organising interpretations introduces a false dichotomy, and the evaluative sense of these names is uncertain. It must be obvious that one person's positive image (suburban married life) is another's vision of hell. But what must once again be emphasised — as has been insisted upon in every chapter of this work — is that it is necessary to always broaden the range of Aboriginal representations available. Those films which present a materially and creatively successful Aboriginality, and which offer this as a possibility for other Aboriginal people, should not be demonised under an interpretive scheme which insists on a realism of poverty; or an academic schema which rejects bourgeois 'positive images'. Until the image of the happy, wealthy, beautiful, culturally-sensitive Aboriginal woman becomes the dominant one, crowding out any Aboriginal dream of alternative lifestyles, the claims of the dangers of such a 'positive image' carry little charge. At the moment, such a dominance seems to be some distance away.

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1   Although Michael Leigh, when he was the curator of the film collection at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, suggested that *Black Fire*, directed by Bruce McGuinness, should be accorded that title.

2   Certainly it may be argued that the proportion of middle-class Aboriginal people is small, that such images are unrepresentative. However, filmic images have never claimed to be representative. As E K Fisk suggests, 'the proportion of Aborigines that are abjectly poor is small, but in many sections of the community, they are most visible' (Fisk, 1983: 106). Similarly, Aboriginal people living

traditionally-oriented lifestyles have a visibility which is not directly proportional to their statistical representation in the population.

# Chapter C.3: Performance

## C.3.1

> ...every time Robert Tudawali as Marbuk strides across the screen, something
> magic happens. The flatulence and patronising elements in the script work
> against this magic, but for a time at least the actor vivifies the Aborigine as
> myth...(Sean Maynard on *Jedda*, 1989: 219)

As Meaghan Morris has illustrated, film reviews tend to be structurally very
similar, drawing attention to those aspects of films (for example, the
narrative) which are allowed to be relevant in the production of readings.
The making of a narrative is indeed the dominant aspect of these
interpretations (Morris, 1983: 54); however, other aspects of films are also
validated. The performance of particular actors is, for example, often focused
upon as relevant in this process; and, more than this, as allowing a space in
which meanings can be produced quite separately from those related to
narrative. Similarly in more academic film criticism, performance has been
constructed as a space in which readings might be made; readings which are
quite distinct from those interpretations which turn around narrative — or
even, around character. Both reviewing and criticism allow for the possibility
that the performances of particular actors might be read as meaningful in
ways that are distinct from, even quite contradictory to, these scripted
components of the film. In the case of Aboriginal performances in Australian
films, reading aspects of the texts within the framework of performance has
allowed for interpretations to be made which are consciously different from
those which become available if only scripted elements are considered. This
chapter seeks not to challenge this work, but to examine the conditions of
possibility for such an interpretive schemata. In celebrations of performance,
those interpretations which read the films in terms of an actor's work, is it in
fact necessary for any particular textual material to be present? Or can
celebrations of performance be invoked in redemptive interpretive work of
any film or television program?

## C.3.2

As was suggested in Chapter B.4, writing on stars has often collapsed at least two quite separate areas: star image (the production of meaning by way of validating an oeuvre as intertexts), and star performance. This latter is conceived as being, in some way, a textual feature — a charisma which has particular implications for interpretations of films. These are performances which:

> ...truly suggest the godlike...reveal and open their beings...incarnate complexity in manners...we are active in the assimilation of gesture, tone, expression ...[they] call us to participate, to savour the delight of their rhythms and rhymes, the flow of their contours...the range of consciousness stimulated in the viewer, the quality of [a star's] activity resonates within us...forces our vision to new heights (Charles Affron, 1977: 7, 10).

This 'star quality', this 'Star Acting' (Affron, 1977) is believed to be exhibited in the text. As Siegfried Kracauer puts it:

> Why is any one chosen for stardom while others are not? Evidently, something about the gait of the star, the form of his face, his manner of reacting, ingratiates itself...deeply within the masses of moviegoers (Kracauer, 1960: 100)[1].

There is no critical definition of this 'something', but it has many names: charisma, transcendence, sublimity, genius. The interpretive work of film reviewing certainly allows for an actor's execution of a part to be celebrated as central to the work of interpreting a film; and certain, ill-defined textual features make such interpretations possible. In an academic context, this approach to reading performance has been characterised by Richard Dyer as 'the Haskell thesis' (Dyer, 1986b: 167).

In order to address this critical approach, it is necessary briefly to sketch the logic of self-nominated 'partial readings'. Such an interpretive approach finds different and unequal interpretations in supposedly reactionary films. A first, and dominant, reading is understood to be that which is available to the

uninitiated reader: it is an ideologically mischievous one, read out of such filmic elements as dialogue, editing, the progress of the narrative. This is referred to as the ideology of 'the film'. Having established such a hegemonic presence (and having linked it to the narrative, and so on) a second, contrary reading is then suggested — one which focuses on the performance of particular actors. Creating a small island of alternative meaning in the midst of a supposedly reactionary text, the performances can be read as suggesting a different ideology — a more attractive way of interpreting characters, lines, and the narratives in which they find themselves. The ways in which actors execute scripts is justified as providing the necessary textual material to make more palatable readings of a film.

Such a critical paradigm can be found in histories both of black and of feminist writing on the cinema (it has not evolved for television in these areas). Richard Dyer, as suggested above, marks as a suitable point of origin for this interpretive approach, Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (1974). He defines as 'the Haskell thesis':

> the possibility of stars resisting their material not only by what they inescapably signify...but also through performance (Dyer, 1986b: 167).

In Haskell's book, the idea is expounded in relation to the great female stars of the twentieth century:

> We remember them not for the humiliations and compromises they endured in conforming to stereotypes, but for the incandescent moments in which their uniqueness made mockery of stereotypes (Haskell, 1974: v).

As suggested above, the dichotomy invoked posits 'performance' against 'narrative':

> Whatever the endings that were forced on Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Carol Lombard...the images we retain of them are not those of subjugation or humiliation; rather we remember their intermediate victories, we retain images of intelligence, personal style and forcefulness...[they] rose to the surface and projected through sheer will and talent and charisma, images of emotional and intellectual power (Haskell, 1974: 31, 8).

Haskell also begins to suggest the ways in which such performances interact
with readings of narrative: 'More often than not [they] were consciously
playing a role, or playing up a role...an element of self...parody' (Haskell,
1974: 108); their:

> ...alienation is Brechtian, suggesting a certain consciousness of effect: beyond
> the pantomime, a regal presence — the seduction, the surrender, the posture
> of helplessness — we occasionally hear the actress chuckle, or see her peeking
> out from behind her lines... (Haskell, 1974: 106).

Such an interpretive approach, invoking this schema in order to produce
more attractive readings of apparently difficult representations, has also
proven to be a popular one in work about race.  It is a critical commonplace
that: 'black stars could work against the grain of film...[presenting] reality and
truth' (Dyer, 1987: 71).  The use of this interpretive schema in critical writing
allows, for example, Paul Robeson's performance to be validated and read as
central to meaning production in interpretations of his films:  Dyer suggests a
common critical reading whereby the characters that actor plays in his films
are understood to be:

> ...written as docile, simple, good characters...[and i]t is sometimes argued
> that, at the level of performance, Robeson himself suggests a level of
> insolence or irony that undercuts this Uncle Tom/Sambo stereotype (1987:
> 97)[2].

James Baldwin similarly invokes this critical schema, moving it from an
origin in feminist film writing to apply it to raced representations.
Commenting on Bette Davis in *This is Our Life*, he finds that:

> Her performance had the effect...of exposing and shattering the film...the
> same thing was to happen, later, to Sydney Poitier...in *The Defiant Ones*...his
> performance, which lends the film its only real distinction, also,
> paradoxically, smashes it to pieces.  There is no way to believe both [Poitier's
> character] and the story...The Harlem audience....recognised in Sidney's
> face...something noble, true and terrible... (Baldwin, 1976: 58, 59-60).

Again, such an interpretive schema involves producing in fact two readings
of a film; that which is perceived to be dominant (produced from textual

features such as editing, camera movement, dialogue and narrative
trajectory): and a more attractive, 'radical' (partial) reading, made from those
textual elements associated with an actor's execution of the script:

> ...the most exasperating aspect of *Lady Sings the Blues*, for me, is that the three
> principles — Diana Ross, Billy Dee Williams, and Richard Pryor — are clearly
> ready, willing and able to stretch out and go a distance not permitted by the
> film. And even within this straitjacket, they manage marvellous moments,
> and a truth which is not in the script is sometimes glimpsed through them
> (Baldwin, 1976: 101).

Film reviewing and criticism, then, rather than consistently promoting
narrative and character as necessarily fundamental to the process of making
meaning from films, have allowed interpretive schemata in which textual
elements can be read as 'performance', to produce readings which are distinct
from, and in opposition to, readings made from other elements. The presence
of this enabling schema has produced particular readings of Australian filmic
representations of the Aboriginal.

## C.3.3

*Jedda* is a particularly popular film for such interpretive approaches. In fact, it
now seems to be some sort of critical orthodoxy to suggest that the film
should be interpreted in two quite distinct (and often authored) ways. On the
one hand, the script of the film, 'Chauvel's *Jedda*' is criticised for its simplistic
nature, assimilationist bent, or even for overt 'racism'; while the performances
of the Aboriginal actors, and in particular of Robert Tudawali as Marbuk, are
insistently celebrated as offering possibilities for clusters of alternative
interpretations. The comments of Sean Maynard which preface this chapter
suggests both of these *Jeddas*: that of the script, and that of the performance.
This approach has been available since the film's first release. Gerry Grant,
for example, writes that '*Jedda* is a thoroughly bad film...it appears that
Charles and Elsa Chauvel...take absolutely for granted the essential inferiority
of Aboriginals' (Grant, 1956: 236). Against what is perceived to be the
patronising 'script and direction', though, Grant suggests it is possible to read:
'the reality of the Aboriginal actors of *Jedda*, whose talent, charm and

intelligence belie the parts they are permitted to play' (Grant, 1956: 237).
Similar comments recur throughout the history of critical writing on the film:

> The relative "serenity" of Mungalla Buffalo Station in broken with the entry of
> Marbuk, played with extraordinary skill by Robert Tudawali...With Marbuk's
> entry, the text ceases to possess a recognisable stability...Marbuk so
> dominates the text (Mishra, 1989: 179; see also, Turner, 1989: 137; Jennings,
> 1993: 37).

These possibilities are taken up and pushed to their logical end in Colin
Johnson's (Mudrooroo's) comments on the film:

> Tudawali's acting ability enabled the character to escape the ideological
> bonds the Chauvels had knotted...The film becomes centred around Marbuk,
> and he steals the show for the Aboriginal male. No rags, no downcast eyes,
> no sullenness, no drunken stagger, no Jimmie Blacksmith brutality. He walks
> into the film, proudly, ignoring the cast-off trappings of civilisation...He
> delights in stealing the boss's woman/daughter, in attempting, in trickster
> fashion, to steal the gift of culture from the culture holders...the flatness of
> [Chauvel's] European characters and the strength of Tudawali's role enables
> us to read the film as an Aboriginal text (Johnson, 1987: 53, 56).

## C.3.4

Such an interpretive schema — allowing readings to be made of an actor's
execution of a script, in direct contrast to other textual elements — claims to
be a textually based one. A concern of this thesis with the 'horizons of
expectations' viewers bring to texts, involves acknowledging that there are
limits on the use which can be made of text. This chapter provides a useful
case study — allowing an investigation of the degree to which such limits are
in fact textual. Are there any necessary textual conditions for reading a
particular 'performance' as a centre of meaning in a film? Or can any actor in
any film be interpreted in such a way? Both critical and reviewing discourses
assert that there is a necessary 'charisma' — strength, genius, luminosity — in
some performances which allows them to be read as central to the production
of meaning. But is this in fact the case? How is 'charisma' exhibited

textually?  What are the particular elements which can be measured in a 'strong' performance?  For if these textual elements are indeed, as appears to be the case, entirely subjective, then any performance of any Aboriginal actor in any film or television program can be simply asserted as 'charismatic', powerful, sublime; and thus suitable for an interpretive schema which celebrates that actor's presence over the scripted material of the film.

What, then, are the textual limits on charisma?


## C.3.5

In order to ask this question, it is necessary first to address the difficult fact that there remains, despite decades of reviewing and critical practice, no sustained vocabulary for describing film and television acting, or the ways in which it communicates information (Affron, 1977: 3).  What writing does exist on performance tends to work in only very abstract terms, employing swathes of impressionistic validation or condemnation which rarely engage with the textual moments of meaning production on the screen.  For the most part, it seems, there are only two categories into which performance might be divided — 'good' and 'bad'.  It is difficult to make any further generalisations about taxonomy, however, because, although each writer on this subject seems to believe strongly that the good/bad dichotomy is a central one, the characteristics which they associate with each term differ wildly.  Some writers on charismatic, 'star' acting simply divide performances into two types:  stars ('actors who are the same in every film'); and actors ('who put aside [their] own personality to think [their] way into an alien psyche': James Scott, quoted in Dyer, 1986b: 162[3]).  Other writers reverse the distinction, to divide actors into those great performers (stars) who change their performance with every role, and more prosaic actors, who appear as the same whatever character they putatively play (Leo Bobker, 1974: 156, 157; Siegfried Kracauer, 1960: 99, 101).  None of these writers offer details of the particular textual features of performance enable them to make their categorisations; rather, their pronouncements remain entirely subjective: so, for example, Siegfried Kracauer celebrates Charles Laughton as being so different in each of his roles that even his basic physical characteristics seem

to alter; Leo Bobker consigns the same actor to a list of those who 'seldom varied their performance from role to role' (Bobker, 1974: 157).

It is also noticeable that all of this writing on star performances relies on interpretations of work across an oeuvre; none of the above writers addresses the question of whether in fact the 'star performance', that charismatic textual presence which enables redemptive readings to be made of texts, is in fact manifestly different from the performance of a prosaic 'actor' in any single text: comparisons can only be made of differences *across* a body of texts.

Another distinction made in writing on film acting is between those performances which can easily be read into the service of other parts of a film (character, narrative, and so on) and those which are in some way self-serving — excessive or contradictory. This is often aligned with the distinction between star and character acting — the non/presence of charisma. Richard Dyer suggests this distinction: 'films in which performance fits with other signs of character...and those in which the fit is more contradictory' (Dyer, 1986b: 176). Here, those performances which are charismatic, (those which would enable the invocation of the 'Haskell thesis' to provide alternative interpretations of films), are simply those which draw attention to themselves as performance (see also Charles Affron, 1977: 7, 292). Textually, such performances might be distinguished by: 'simply quantifying the character traits exhibited by a performer' (James Naremore, 1988: 25) — some actors 'act' more than others. But again, such beliefs are subjective — and often contradicted by other writers, for there is also a strong tendency in critical writing to celebrate as great those performances which are *less* ostentatious; Siegfried Kracauer, for example, feels that: 'the film actor must act as if he did not act at all' (Kracauer, 1960: 95; see also Naremore, 1988: 101; and Alfred Hitchcock, quoted in Naremore, 1988: 34).

There exists, then, no self-conscious investigation of which textual features actually allow a performance to be celebrated and made the centre of a film's interpretation. It is not simply 'star performance', or good acting, or charisma; for none of these subjective qualities has been tied to particular textual elements. These labels are simply part of an interpretive schema which, it appears, is so subjective it can be invoked in relation to any

performance by any actor; or at least, cannot be contradicted convincingly except by simple assertions that: 'No she isn't'.

Another quality which is suggested as necessary in performances which will be read as charismatic, and thus a suitable centre for interpreting a film, is a sensuality, a suggestion of corporeal presence (see James Naremore on Katherine Hepburn, 1988: 180; and on Marlon Brando, 1988: 194; also Frank McConnell on Marlene Dietrich, 1975: 179). Again, though, this must be a subjective quality. Even comments by Roland Barthes, which seem to offer a vocabulary to discuss such elements of performance, in fact offer little in the way of reproducible ways of organising textual information. Barthes' article is on the 'grain' of the voice, a charismatic quality which the writer links to corporeal presence in performance:

> ...the grain is...the materiality of the body...is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs (Barthes, 1977: 188).

Again, though, this is a subjective quality, not a textual feature. Any performance can be asserted as physical, as 'grainy'; arguments against such labelling can go little further than, 'No it's not'.

Finally, the current state of critical writing on acting does not provide any means of defining what textual features are necessary in order to enable the interpretive schema of the 'Haskell thesis'. Whether or not a given performance can be read redemptively (as overcoming a script) can be answered only in avowedly subjective terms. James Baldwin, as noted above, finds Sidney Poitier to have a charismatic presence on film, a performance style which fractures texts and to reveal a black 'truth' and 'authenticity' (Baldwin, 1976: 58, 59-60). By contrast, when Frank McConnell writes on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, he finds it possible to dismiss Poitier's performance entirely from consideration. The actor vanishes along with the rest of the cast in McConnell's assertion that the only reason for watching the film is the performance of Spencer Tracy:

> ...the energy with which he carries his role....[his] genius...[his] dignity and tremendous, suicidal energy...his performance is ultimately a statement of life and persistence whose existential profundity goes far beyond the simple morality which the film intends to convey (McConnell, 1975: 167).

Sidney Poitier, it seems, can come into focus as a charismatic performer when
it is necessary; and can be ignored by different spectators who require other
readings.

## C.3.6

In order to further investigate the question of whether there are textual
features limiting the application of this interpretive schema to the work of all
Aboriginal actors in Australian films and television programs, it is necessary
to employ a more precise vocabulary than has previously been the case in
writing about acting.  Richard Dyer and Martin Esslin both suggest that such
a vocabulary might be found in work which has explored the application of
semiotics to theatrical performances; and in the system of kinesics which has
been involved in that project.

Umberto Eco has made clear that an account of semiotics, a: 'unified
theoretical approach to the great variety of systems of signification and
communication' (Eco, 1977:  108), can be mobilised to address the
communicative work of physical performance, although the complexity of
such signs renders the project incredibly difficult (Eco, 1976: 119).  There are a
multitude of sign systems involved in even the simplest movement:  any
performance, even that involved in the execution of a single line, is a complex
series of signifying elements, involving dozens of movements and aural
indicators each second.  Another difficulty has been that of defining the
smallest unit of meaning.  In the analogue realm of physical performance,
there is no immediately obvious equivalent to the morpheme (Naremore,
1988: 2; see also Elam, 1980: 71; Shechner, 1973; and Aston, 1987).

Work in theatre and film semiotics of acting, then, has done little more than
enumerate groups of sign-systems, as with Erika Fischer-Lichte's taxonomy of
three sign-systems of movement ('mimic' signs, of the face; 'gestural' signs ,
which are movement of the body without a change in position; and proxemic
signs, which is movement through space) and two sign-systems of acoustic
signs (linguistic, and paralinguistic; Fischer-Lichte, 1992: 18-63.  See similar
taxonomies of sign-systems in Dyer, 1986b: 151; Elam, 1980: 50; and Esslin,
1987: 63).

Beyond the grouping of signs, the most useful work in notating and describing textual features of performance — in a way that might reveal exactly what material conditions are necessary to interpret 'charisma' — comes from other disciplines; for example in that area of social psychology and physics which has been called 'voice science' (Judson, Weaver and Thomas, 1966). Illustrating the incoherence of common-sense vocabularies used to describe vocal performance (Johan Sundberg, 1987: 5), such work delineates those voice qualities which speakers in fact employ when producing interpretations. There exists no standard list of those measurable voice characteristics which convey information. However, such qualities as 'fundamental frequency' (pitch); 'pitch contour' (the variation of pitch over a sentence); 'amplitude' (loudness of the voice at each syllable); 'spectral timbral characteristics' (the timbre of the voice, measured as the range of harmonic frequencies); and 'rate of speech' are repeatedly isolated in studies of how vocal performance communicates information (Kramer, 1963; Constanzo, 1969; Scherer, 1972; Lieberman, 1974; Scherer, 1979a and 1979b; Laver and Trudgill, 1979; Sundberg, 1987). Voice science claims to have found certain correlations between these characteristics and interpretations made of a speaker's personality and emotional state (Scherer, 1972; Scherer, London et al, 1973: 31; Scherer, 1979a and 1979b).

In terms of the movement systems of performance — mimic, gesture and proxemics — one well-known and often cited area of work has been the system of kinesics developed and popularised by Ray L Birdwhistell[4]. This is:

> ...the science of human body motion behaviour based on analogical analysis of gesture, posture, grouping and constellations of groupings, all of which are presumed to contain understandable communications (Schechner and Mintz, 1973: 103);

More simply, it is: 'the study of the human body as a means of communication' (Aston and Savona, 1991: 116). Kinesics consists of the detailed study of body movements, and of the readings made of these movements by interpreting subjects. Birdwhistell isolates and replays body movements in order to gauge subjects' reactions to them, dividing the body into eight zones[5] — an arbitrary taxonomy, whose major importance is that it

draws attention to the way in which all parts of the body may be involved in the production of meaningful signs. He suggests that the smallest possible units of meaning in body movements — the simplest motions which, by themselves, were perceived by his informants to convey meaning — should be called 'kinemes' (Birdwhistell, 1970: 166). He finds thirty-two of these kinemes in the area of the face and head (Birdwhistell, 1970: 99); from combinations of such simple kinemes, come more complex signs — kinemorphs. The complicated relationship between single elements and interpretations made does not allow for a simple mapping from kineme to interpreted emotion or attitude[6]; factors such as the complexity of the facial muscles (Birdwhistell estimates that over 20,000 different facial meanings are possible), differences in individual physiognomy, the analogue nature of such signs, and the importance of context render the semiotics of physical communication difficult. It is, though, as with voice science, possible to suggest some general codes, groups of movements which are perceived to be meaningful[7]. In this case, Birdwhistell provides a list of 'movement modifiers' for kinemorphs. These allow for a more general level in the description of movement. The modifiers are structured as antonymic pairs: 'Rhythmic-Disrhythmic', for example, or 'Graceful-Awkward', 'Self-possessed-Self-contained', and so on (Birdwhistell, 1970: 215-217). The interest of these terms comes from the fact that they are not random epithets, but modifiers which, in Birdwhistell's experience, are perceived to be meaningful by Western subjects. These descriptors will indeed be mobilised later in this work — and with a certain degree of confidence that they are meaningful components of the act of interpreting a performance.

## C.3.7

The performance of Robert Tudawali is celebrated for his 'charm' (Grant, 1956: 236), his 'extraordinary presence' (Jennings, 1993b: 37), his 'magic' (Maynard, 1989: 219), for being 'a star who carries immense conviction' (Turner, 1988: 137). As suggested in this work, there is little attention to the specific textual features which enable interpretations to cluster around this performance. It seems to be more of a generic norm of writing on *Jedda* than a fully thought-through critical position.

In asking whether there are necessary textual features which allow such a celebration of performance, or if in fact this critical turn may be taken for any actor's execution of any role, Tudawali's performance should be avoided, simply for its canonical and unassailable status. Instead, this chapter examines two more recent performances, one universally celebrated as charismatic, the other entirely ignored in critical writing, to see how they compare textually.

Firstly, David Ngoombujarra, in James Ricketson's 1993 film *Blackfellas*, is celebrated for his performance as Pretty Boy Floyd (it wins him an AFI award for Best Supporting Actor). Reviews of the film rarely fail to centre him:

> David Ngoombujarra, with his deep voice and mile-wide smile, has a natural screen presence and he makes every moment of his screen time a pleasure to watch (Hutchinson, 1993).

Readings of the film explicitly turn to Ngoombujarra's performance for justification of their interpretations: 'Ngoombujarra is an extraordinarily vivid performer, investing Pretty Boy with so much charm that we keep forgiving him' (Bunbury, 1993: 49; see also Jameson, 1993; and Anon, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 1993). These reviews tell us all and nothing about Ngoombujarra's performance. It is 'charismatic' they insist over and over again — but what does that mean?

By contrast, Justine Saunders is a well-known Aboriginal actress, who has worked in film and television for several decades. As a jobbing actress, she appears as often the only Aboriginal cast member in episodes of television shows such as *The Timeless Land*, *Number 96*, and *The Flying Doctors*. Her performances have never been fêted in the terms used above for Ngoombujarra. A large part of this must be due to the fact that her appearances have been predominantly on television[8]: reviews of television programs do not typically analyse individual performances. But it is also true that Saunders' performance style is quite different from that of Ngoombujarra. In order to describe how this is so, a single episode of Saunders' performance in *Prisoner* is analysed: in it she plays a visiting prison psychologist. The particular episode chosen, number 666, is one which contains a scene which should allow for the possibility of a charismatic piece

of performance: the psychologist recites a dreamtime story for the women prisoners. Detailed discussion of Saunders' performance in this situation allows differences to emerge between the signs of her performance, and those of Ngoombujarra's — a space that might form a basic understanding of 'charisma'.

## C.3.8

Looking at the elements of performance which voice science and kinesics have identified as significant, certain differences between Saunders' and Ngoombujarra's performances can be noted, and will be discussed below.

i) Ngoombujarra's voice is deeper than Saunders'.

As Ivan Hutchinson notes in his review of *Blackfellas*, Ngoombujarra's deep voice is part of his 'charm'. His standard, unmarked tone is noticeably deeper than those around him (compare his first scene with John Moore in the bar for a typical example of this). When he expresses extremes of emotion — joy or despair — he also produces a range of guttural noises which are very deeply pitched — as in his roar in the kitchen after he has slapped Val; or the laugh which he produces at various times in the film. By contrast, Justine Saunders' voice is not noticeably deep. Although it is by no means high-pitched, it is not marked as 'deep' in the same way as Ngoombujarra's is.

ii) Ngoombujarra's voice has more 'resonance' than that of Saunders.

As with pitch, this is a paralinguistic code (not related directly to the 'linguistic' element of speech, of the words actually said). 'Resonance' is a meaningful term in discussing the interpretation of voice sounds. It should take its meaning from an opposition to 'breathy' voices, and relates to the various harmonic frequencies which make up a voice's timbre (Kramer 1963; Scherer, 1979 'Personality'). Taking an impressionistic stance, it seems fair to state that Ngoombujarra's voice is indeed 'resonant', Saunders' more 'breathy' (tautologically, it lacks resonance).

iii) Ngoombujarra and Saunders have different accents.

This is a phonetic feature, one which is not commonly listed as paralinguistic, but which is nonetheless involved in the production of meaning in excess to that implied by the purely linguistic component of speech. Ngoombujarra's accent is more 'Aboriginal', 'Australian', 'broader'. It is more noticeable to an non-Australian viewer. On the linguistic level, he uses a specifically slang vocabulary, as in the bar scene, where he says to Dougie, 'heard you was crook with me'; as well as sentence constructions which can be interpreted as marking an Aboriginal Australian accent — the tendency to end sentences with 'bro' and 'eh?', as in 'Come on Dougie, C'mon bro!' outside the prison. However, there are also items in his phonetic range which call attention to themselves. Whereas Saunders' accent is not noticeable in the context of the other middle-class Australian accents of the *Prisoner* staff milieu, Ngoombujarra's is much broader. For example, in the scene outside the prison, when Dougie does eventually get into the car, Ngoombujarra's appreciative 'Hey!' is a swooping-pitched call which calls attention to itself as a very Australian vowel sound.

iv) The 'sentence contour', or the way in which pitch alters across sentences is different for the two actors.

In Saunders' performance, there is little in the way of pitch modulation. The overall impression of listening to her voice is one of a pitch which barely varies for most of the length of the sentences she speaks. In the first corridor scene of *Prisoner*, for example, the speech which begins 'Don't kid yourself Anne', is (if only scripted material is considered) written almost as an aria. The rapid repetition of sentence structure seems to aim for a comic effect. As Justine Saunders speaks this, though, there is little in the way of such a comic effect. This lack can largely be ascribed to the absence of variation the voice she uses; her tone alters very little. By comparison, Ngoombujarra's speech features a vast range of pitches: low and confidential for some lines, high and mocking for others, with exclamations and cries marking extremes at both boundaries.

Also, what variation in pitch Saunders does introduce tends to follow a fairly standard curve for most lines she speaks — whether the linguistic element of

that line implies anger, resolution, indifference, or even a question. Her typical contour is structured with a slight dip in the middle of the sentence, and a rising pitch at the end (see lines such as 'He wouldn't budge...' in the corridor scene; and 'When Craven's ready...' in Sarah's room). The largely invariant nature of this pitch contour quickly begins to draw attention to itself, particularly when it is seemingly in opposition to the linguistic component of the speech.

v) Ngoombujarra speaks with a rhythmic quality; Saunders with a regular one.

When Saunders speaks, she emphasises more words than one would expect — with a regularity that is more like the beating of a metronome than the rhythm we expect of speech. In everyday conversation, there tends to be only one major stress per sentence, while other secondary stresses help the listener to make linguistic sense of the utterances. Saunders does not follow this pattern. Ngoombujarra does. In a line from her Dreamtime story, for example, Saunders says: 'the *men* of the sur*roun*ding tribe planned to *seize* the *weapons* by *force*. *But* because the *Wilbaya*...'. Each of the italicised words is stressed by an increase in amplitude; and these stresses sound the same. They are of similar amplitude, not graded to suggest meaning. The regularity of these emphases draws attention to itself in a way that is not true for Ngoombujarra.

In Saunders' above-noted corridor 'aria', lack of rhythmic variation is as noticeable as uniform pitch. This can be compared with a speech spoken by Ngoombujarra in *Blackfellas*: after the football game, he is given a structurally similar line, one which aims to derive comedy from a rapidly repeating sentence structure. Here, the emphases occur strongly only on a few words, allowing a sense to be made of what is said, even as the speed of recitation reveals its comic status as nonsense.

vi) Both Saunders and Ngoombujarra can speak quickly. However, as is true of pitch and amplitude, Saunders varies the speed much less.

There are specific moments when she presents one line more slowly, and this does create some effect: however, the lack of associated modulations (pitch, amplitude) makes this awkward. Saunders' speech is also littered with

pauses. These call attention to themselves by bearing little relationship to the linguistic elements of her lines. There are many examples of this throughout the *Prisoner* episode: again, one example can be drawn from the Dreamtime story: 'the men from the surrounding tribes planned go steal the boomerangs [pause] by trickery...the camp [pause] was empty...'

The fact of Ngoombujarra speaking quickly can easily be heard by comparing his delivery with that of another performer in a scene. For example, in the car outside the prison, his delivery and that of Polly are at very different rates. However, Ngoombujarra can also deliver lines much more slowly.

vii) Ngoombujarra moves more than does Saunders.

This is the most noticeable distinction between the physical performance styles of the two actors. For example, when Justine Saunders delivers her lines while walking down the corridor in *Prisoner*, she holds her hands grasped in front of her; her torso from neck to waist remains completely immobile as she walks. That walk is incredibly controlled: her head also stays at the same level. Similarly, as she delivers the first part of her Dreamtime story in the Recreation Room, Saunders' body is almost completely static from the neck down. The only movement comes from one arm, which moves exclusively from the shoulder (not at the elbow or wrist). Also, Saunders' face tends towards a rest position which is 'neutral'. That is, not only is it largely static when she is not speaking: but the position in which is sits signifies nothing. As Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, most cultures have a 'neutral' state for various performative codes, one which is understood to actively signal lack of significance (Fischer-Lichte, 1992: 27). It is in just such a static position that Saunders' face rests when she is not executing specific mimic signifiers.

This lack of movement can be compared with a single line of Ngoombujarra's: in the car outside the prison, he says: 'It's Willis's car, ain't it Willis?'. In speaking these few words, he performs a variety of actions. As well as that movement associated with a range of expressions on his face, he gestures with a hand; turns his whole head to look at the car's driver; turns it back to Dougie; back to the driver; and then back again to Dougie. Not only in speaking his lines, but even when he is merely reacting to other actors, Ngoombujarra is constantly moving, and involved in 'business'. As he listens

to Dougie in the car, he smiles, leans over, slaps Dougie's back, throws his head back and laughs.  In a later scene at the camp, while Val (his girlfriend) talks, Ngoombujarra swings his arms up, takes off his cowboy hat, puts it on her head.  In another, still later, scene, after he has played a professional football match, Ngoombujarra runs up behind Val in a sneaking lope and grabs her around the waist.  Even when he is not speaking, then, he is involved in a continual exhibition of mimic, gestural and proxemic movement.  Even in his 'neutral' stance, when he is merely standing in the background of a shot listening to someone talk, Ngoombujarra constantly shifts his weight from foot to foot.  He gives no cues that this is to be interpreted as nervousness: he looks not at his feet, for example, but straight ahead .  Rather, it seems to signify no more than itself — movement, physicality, energy.

viii)  There is quality about Ngoombujarra's movements that can be qualified as 'looseness'.

As noted above, the walking styles of the two performers are very different.  Saunders' walk seems to be stilted: her head stays on the one level through her entire stride, and it seems to be less controlled than rigid.  By contrast, when Ngoombujarra walks, it could well be described as 'loping':  his arms and his legs move with a controlled looseness.  In order best to illustrate what is meant by this, observe Ngoombujarra's arms as he walks.  His wrists seem to be loose, so that his hands lag a little behind the rest of his arm as it moves; and then it swings up at the end of the arm's arc, so that it is left behind slightly again as the arm descends.  This looseness characterises many of Ngoombujarra's gestures.  Again, when he stands in his 'neutral' stance, his arms do not hang limply at his side, nor are they held rigid:  rather, they dangle slightly out from the side of his body, with a looseness that can easily follow any movement of the torso.  In his dancing in the camp, the way his limbs move is again made obvious:  not only is there is a lot of movement involved, at the hips, knees, shoulders, elbows and wrists, but that movement is loosely powerful.

ix) 'Graceful/Awkward'.

This is one of the 'descriptors of movement' which Birdwhistell finds
significant in human movement. In the former:

> the mover tends to make a major proportion of movements in a directed,
> minimally interrupted manner, as opposed to a start-stop action...grace is
> characterised by containing minimal "searching" behaviour...(Birdwhistell,
> 1970: 215)

The latter term suggests the opposite qualities. This is certainly related to the
above comments on 'looseness', but goes further, to describe the general
impressions given by the movements of the actor. As well as being rigid,
Saunders' movements appear jerky. In the corridor scene when she says that
Craven 'told me she was on a charge', the gestures of her hands, shoulders
and head are all very awkward — they start and stop very immediately.
Similarly, her face, when not performing a specific mimic expression, returns
to a static 'neutral' state, so that her facial performance appears awkward,
moving from a given expression, to the neutral position, to the next
expression. There is no sense of connection from one stage to the next.
Again, in Sarah's room, Saunders starts the scene leaning against the sink, in a
very rigid position: she then suddenly stands up straight, strides forward,
and assumes another static position — standing before Sarah, arms clasped in
front of her. Again, her lower body stays still for the rest of the scene. The
effect of these stop-start motions is a very jerky one.

By contrast, Ngoombujarra's movements can be characterised as 'graceful'. In
the car outside the prison, he makes a gesture with his arm towards the
driver: the motion is loose and controlled, involving a lot of his upper body.
There is no abrupt start of the motion, and it does not cut off suddenly. This
gracefulness of Ngoombujarra's movements is obvious as he plays Aussie
rules, both at the camp and on the professional field: moving very quickly,
with total control over a supple, loose body.

x) Another of Birdwhistell's descriptors of movement is
'integrated/fragmented'.

The former: 'tends towards harmonic organisation of various body parts'; while the latter 'may divide the body into non-harmonic — even contradictory — parts' (Birdwhistell, 1970: 216). Again, Saunders and Ngoombujarra neatly illustrate opposite poles of the dichotomy. In the corridor scene, when Saunders is required to give her attention to the Freak, she does so by turning her head in that direction. None of the rest of her body is involved in this movement. This is an example of the lack of integration in her body movements: one part will often perform a specific action, while the rest of the body is not involved or associated in any way. The most notable examples of this tendency are the hand movements which occasionally occur in her performance. For example, in the corridor scene, when she says 'Anne, you do the man an injustice', Saunders has her arms firmly crossed over her chest. One arm comes free: it makes a single, tight little gesture from the elbow, waving fingers in the air; and then returns to the bosom. While the arm is moving the rest of her upper body stays static: there is no movement of the shoulders or torso such as would normally be associated with an arm movement. Similarly, in the recreation room, as she tells her Dreamtime story — 'Long, long time ago...' — Saunders holds static her entire body except for one arm. Again, this arm makes a circumscribed movement (drawing a rigid arc in the air) and again, the rest of the body remains uninvolved in that movement. In this scene, the one arm continues to make movements during the story, joined only occasionally by the other arm. The rest of the body remains static however: and the movements of the two arms, because of this static torso resting between them, appear unconnected.

By contrast, Ngoombujarra's movements involve his whole body. When he is laughing in the car outside the prison, he leans over, slaps Dougie's back, throws his head back, and so on. A single gesture (as with that towards Willis, the driver) involves the torso, neck and head as well as the arm and shoulders. Similarly, after the football match, when he finds there is no money for drink, Ngoombujarra says: 'That's killed the cat', and performs a signifying manoeuvre of dissatisfaction which involves his whole body in a series of related movements: his hands are on his hips; he moves his weight from foot to foot, swings his arms away from his waist, swings one back up again, the other continues to move loosely — none of these movements

demands attention as unrelated to the rest: they are quite easily read into a single physical expression of his annoyance.

xi) 'Intertensive/intratensive'

This is Birdwhistell's terminology to describe the way in which one subject is perceived to relate to other subjects in the course of a conversation. The former is: 'highly responsive to the behaviour of other communicants', while the latter: 'appears to engage in extended autostimulation' (Birdwhistell, 1970: 216). Justine Saunders often does not look at people who are talking to her, as with the governor and the Freak in the corridor scene. More noticeable is her lack of reaction to the comments of other people. When the Freak makes offensive comments about Craven, Saunders does not change her stride or posture; her mouth stays immobile, there is no mimic gesture of anger (or of any kind of reaction). Similarly, as Sarah West, the Aboriginal prisoner, accuses her of being a 'coconut' (black on the outside, white on the inside), there is no mimic reaction; when Spider interrupts Saunder's Dreamtime story with offensive comments, there is again no facial reaction. In the last two of these scenes, the editing specifically provides a space for the reactions — in explicit 'reaction shots'. These in fact show Saunders with her face in a neutral position.

By contrast, one of the most noticeable aspects of Ngoombujarra's performance is the way he engages with people around him. He looks directly at whoever he is speaking to; but more than this, whenever the focus of attention changes, even briefly, he registers this with a look — as in his frequent head turns while saying: 'It's Willis' car, ain't it Willis?'. Ngoombujarra is also involved in a constant physical engagement with those around him. In the car outside the prison, he celebrates Dougie getting into the car with him by putting his arms around Dougie and Willis, drawing them together, creating a social group; his looks backward and forward between the two of them affirm that grouping.

xii) Gestures appear conventional/do not appear conventional.

This distinction comes not from Birdwhistell, but is more to do with the codes of 'acting'. As writers like Delsarte and Aubert make clear, at particular historical moments, there are often standard repertoires of gestures in theatre

and film acting (Naremore, 1988: 57-59). As these gestures become codified, they start to be recognisable as much for their own standard status as gestures as they are for the meaning they hope to convey. This is the case with several of the gestures and proxemic movements adopted by Justine Saunders in the *Prisoner* episode: they are standard soap opera codes, relating back to other melodramatic systems. For example, in the corridor, when Saunders says: 'I don't know', she reinforces the meaning of this sentence with a gesture — hand held out, palms upwards — that could have come straight from Delsarte's manual. In Sarah's room, when she wishes to engage Sarah aggressively, Saunders strides forward and stand directly in front of the girl, with her face pushed forward, very close to her, and her head tilted slightly back. This is a common proxemic move and placement for such engagement in soap operas. Again, in the recreation room, when Saunders emphasises the word 'trickery' in her speech, she does so by wagging a pointed finger — a gesture so standard that it seems almost comic.

By comparison, very little of Ngoombujarra's physical performance explicitly denotes its own code. In the scene in the house in the camp, when Dougie says 'You're the one with the quick hand, Floyd', the latter signifies a kind of amused exasperation with a complex of gestures including moving his weight from foot to foot, looking away and then back again, rolling his eyes, pursing his lips and so on. There is no simple choice from a recognisable paradigm of meaningful gestures.

xiii) The range of mimic gestures is different in the two performances.

Ngoombujarra has a larger mouth, and his expressions are also larger: more of his face is involved, with more movement, when he is making mimic gestures. By contrast, Saunders' face moves very little. In a line like: 'Outside of doing the slow burn...' (in the corridor), when Saunders smiles, that smile is very contained. Her mouth does not intrude on the rest of her face, and her cheeks, nose and brow do not move in relation to it. The range of expression in the face is relatively slight — her eyes occasionally 'overopen' (Birdwhistell, 1970: 192), as in 'they wouldn't let me through' (in the corridor scene), but this is rare. Mostly, her face seems static and neutral.

Ngoombujarra's face is incredibly mobile. The most noticeable feature is his mouth (as Hutchinson notes in his review of the film). It is very large, very mobile: the movements of his lips, jaw and teeth, and the possibilities for opening his mouth to different degrees lead to a huge combination of possible expressions. Even one line — 'It's not stolen, bro' — involves a lot of movement. He moves from a big smile to grin, to no smile, eyebrows raised slightly, the whole face moving around this motion of the mouth.

xiv) Patterns of eye contact differ in the two performances.

Saunders' patterns draw attention to themselves. As noted above, she does not engage other people with much eye contact as she talks. More than this, there are other specific moments when her gaze implies specific meanings. During the Dreamtime story, for example, at one point she glances off to her left in the middle of the story, a glance which looks as though she has forgotten her lines. Also, as she addresses the audience, she glances around everyone: but she spends so little time looking at each one that the impression is not of engaging them, but merely of glancing over them.

By contrast, Ngoombujarra holds people's gazes intently when talking seriously. So when he starts to say: 'If I was going to steal a car.....', his steady gaze suggests sincerity; while the slightly overopen anxiety of his eyes implies a lack of aggression. As he is always aware of the focus of interest at any point in a scene, following it with his gaze, reacting and interacting with his look, Ngoombujarra's eye contact is always working to establish his place in that scene. The combination of his solid gaze and his huge smile is deadly, and irresistible.

xv) Ngoombujarra's appearance is more congruent with settler notions of Aboriginality.

As was noted in Chapter A.1, cinema has tended to produce images of Aboriginality which have the right *look*. Ngoombujarra has the dark skin, and hair, long, thin limbs, big mouth, white teeth, and dark eyes of settler-culture's 'authentic' Aboriginality. In this context, there are undeniable physical differences between Ngoombujarra and Saunders. Both are visibly 'Aboriginal', in this sense, but Saunders' skin is slightly lighter, and her

features are not as markedly 'Aboriginal'. Her costumes do not emphasise her body shape, and it does not become a racial signifier.


## C.3.9

From these differences, it is possible to read particular textual features of Ngoombujarra's and of Saunders' performances as being more or less attractive, more or less 'charismatic'.

Voice science isolates particular characteristics which are found to be attractive in a voice; both for themselves, and for positive personality characteristics they denote. Deeper voices suggest 'dominance', 'emotional stability' and 'extroversion' (Kramer, 1963). A resonant voice similarly suggests confidence and an outgoing nature; while faster speech implies 'competence' (Laver and Trudgill, 1979). All of these characteristics may be imputed to Ngoombujarra, as is suggested from the above list. The variation in the rate of speech, greater in the case of Ngoombujarra's than Saunders' performance, suggests an extroverted, animated and dynamic personality — as does the variation in pitch across sentences (Scherer, 1979b). Both of these are characteristic of Ngoombujarra's performance.

As suggested before, several writers on acting perceive a necessary physicality in those performances which will be interpreted as attractive and charismatic (McConnell, 1975; Naremore, 1988). In this above schemata can be seen a variety of ways in which Ngoombujarra's performance bears a particular relation to the physical — in his looseness, his greater movement (in his whole body, generally, and in his mimic expressions particularly), his 'graceful' and 'integrated' physical presence. From these characteristics, it is possible to see how one would extrapolate such beliefs as that Ngoombujarra's performance is the more sensual of the two, or the more corporeal. It also seems likely that those components of Ngoombujarra's performance which signal his interest in other people — more generally intertensive, his ability to sustain eye contact in particular — will contribute to readings of his performance as being attractive.

Particular elements of Ngoombujarra's performance can also be read as more 'natural' than Saunders'. The conventional nature of Saunders' acting is manifest in the way that her modulation of pitch, speed and loudness often fail to connect with the linguistic sense of lines; whereas this is rarely the case with Ngoombujarra. In particular, the rhythm of Ngoombujarra's speech is rarely awkward or mechanical, whereas the insistent regularity of Saunders' emphases draws attention to itself. Similarly, the 'conventional' acting and gestures of Saunders often draw attention to themselves as acting — something that is rarely true of Ngoombujarra's more complex kinemorphs. 'Natural' looking acting is often celebrated as attractive. In the case of Aboriginal performers, though, that naturalness has particular implications.

It has long been the case that black actors have been denigrated with assertions that it is nature rather than artifice which fuels their work (Edith Isaacs, quoted in Dyer, 1987: 124). For example, when George Nathan comments on the performance of black American actor Paul Robeson, he states that:

> Robeson gains his effects with means not only that seem natural, but are natural. He does things beautifully with his voice, his features, his hands, his whole somewhat ungainly body, yet I doubt he knows how he does them...the Negro is a born actor, where the white man achieves acting (quoted in Dyer, 1987: 124).

This quotation is peculiarly evocative of the condescension implicit in writing on this subject; but it is not necessary to go to such cross-cultural examples, as the same history can be found in Australia. Ngoombujarra, for example, drifts into acting 'unawares' (Bunbury, 1993: 49); thus rendered devoid of both agency and self-awareness. In a review of *Jedda*, E S Madden similarly finds that Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth have: 'the instinctive sense of the dramatic so characteristic of their race' (Madden, 1955: 239); the idea is so common-sensical that a recent *Cinema Papers* article on early cinema can posit the dichotomy of :'Aborigines and actors' — as though the one necessarily precludes the other — without any sense of irony (Long, 1994).

It may well be, then, that in making readings of Aboriginal acting, those aspects of a performance which can be read as 'natural' take on a peculiar

importance. It is undoubtedly the case that those aspects of Ngoombujarra's performance which can be read as 'authentically' Aboriginal add to his appeal, and allow for his performance to be read as attractive. His accent and use of Aboriginal English terms, and his physical appearance, both add to his 'charisma'. Several Aboriginal actors have been celebrated for their charisma: Robert Tudawali, David Gulpilil, Ernie Dingo and David Ngoombujarra are obvious examples. It seems suggestive that these four actors are physically very similar types. Each is, to some degree, what might be thought of as 'typically' Aboriginal: not only is their skin dark, but their noses tend to be flatter, and their faces rounder than is the case for Justine Saunders. Their limbs are long and slim, mouths large and eyes dark. Physically, each of the four well resembles the image held by settler Australians of what an Aborigine *should* look like.

## C.3.10

From this work, it is possible to suggest some textual features of charisma — those identified by voice science and by Birdwhistell. However, it must be acknowledged that the terminology involved remains so intensely subjective that the above comments are easily put aside. In current approaches, assertions of performance-as-interpretive-centre are usually not textually guaranteed, but merely involve assertion that a given performance is, or is not, charismatic enough to justify placing it at the centre of a reading. As these interpretive schemata currently function, the textual material isolated above can effectively be dismissed as irrelevant. To all intents and purposes, such approaches currently function outside of the texts. It appears that they could be safely applied to any film or television program, reading any performance as a centre of meaning — if only because the vocabulary does not exist to challenge such a Haskell-reading in any meaningful terms. Once again, in denying an actor such as Justine Saunders the 'charismatic' presence necessary to anchor an interpretation, little more can be said than, 'No she isn't'. Perhaps the work of this chapter can begin to suggest some ways in which particular elements of acting might be isolated to enable discussion of Aboriginal performances to be conducted in more useful terms. Certainly, it problematicises a simplistic celebration of performance as the most useful

way of recovering positive representations of Aboriginality in Australian film and television texts.

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[1] As was suggested in Chapter B4, Mark Roth makes clear, with reference to Dick Powell, that this simply not the case (Roth, 1981).

[2] This is not Dyer's own view.  His difficulties with such a thesis will prove suggestive for this work.

[3] See also Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1949: 105; James Naremore, 1988: 1; and Frank McConnell, 1975: 165.

[4] See Dyer, 1986; Keir, 1980; Fischer-Lichte, 1992; and Aston, 1987. Birdwhistell's work deals with the 'performance' of physical communication in the practice of everyday life.  However, the work of Erving Goffman (1969) has made clear that the everyday social self is just as much performed as are conscious roles in film and television. The difference may be one of degree, but it is not one of kind.

[5] These eight are head, face, throat, torso, shoulders and arms, hands, hips and legs, and feet.

[6] Some writers such as Francois Delsarte and Charles Aubert have attempted to produce a codified range of gestures for stage performance, each with a simple meaning — see Naremore, 1988: 57 - 59.

[7] Birdwhistell's kinesics provides what aims to be a complete notational system for transcribing performance.  The appendix to his 1970 book provides a basic vocabulary of his kinemes, as well as the means to record degree, direction, the body parts involved, speed, and other such elements.  The result is a complete new language; unfortunately, when in use, it resembles a computer program, and is incomprehensible to any reader not fluent in kinesics.

[8] Saunders has appeared in two films:  *The Fringe Dwellers* and *Until the End of the World*

# Chapter C.4: Absences

## C.4.1

This last section of the thesis has been concerned to examine the conceptual schemata contributed, by reviewing and critical discourses, to the project of interpreting Aboriginality in films and television programs. These schemata offer particular ways of making sense of indigenous identity in Australia. However, this last chapter is concerned with what occurs if no interpretive schemata is offered. What happens to those representations of Aboriginality which are ignored by reviewing and critical discourses? How can sense be made of these images?

There exist some critical commonplaces about the relationship of Aboriginality to the broadcast media in Australia. One of these finds that the relationship can be characterised as largely one of absence (Macumba, Batty et al, 1980: 8; Sykes, 1990; Bostock, 1993: 12; Martin, 1993: 511; Hamilton, 1993: 6; Molnar, 1994a: 4). This is not true. As each chapter of this thesis has demonstrated, there are representations of Aboriginal people in Australian films and television; these occur in a variety of genres and forms. In fact, the reverse of the commonplace may be true: that there is an insistent *presence* of Aboriginality on Australian television. In one instance of monitoring Melbourne television, from the 4 to the 10 of July 1994, there was at least one television representation of the Aboriginal on every day; on most days, there were several examples[1] Of course, it is true that these instances of Aboriginal representation are structured in particular ways; and it is not possible to assert that Aboriginal people are equally visible in all ways and all forms; but it is assertions of absence which ignore these particular patterns, rather than an acknowledgement of what presence there is. There is, in the case of Australian Aboriginal representation, a non-absence which is not always recognised.

It is true, though, that absence is an important part of Aboriginal
representation in other ways. When academic work consistently fails to
discuss a particular set of televisual representations, these become absent
from the arena of academic discussion. They are not allowed to contribute
to critical discussions, or to modify theoretical commonplaces. In short,
the important absence in Aboriginal televisual representation need not be
in television texts themselves, but in the secondary critical and academic
discourses which enable these representations to enter wider discussions
of Aboriginality's place in the media.


## C.4.2

Sport is an important part of Australian everyday life. Colin Tatz believes
that: 'Australian society...worships sport' (Tatz, 1987: 2); and Christopher
Hallinan suggests that it is: 'the ultimate super-religion' (Hallinan, 1991:
71). Certainly it is (in part due to its cheapness) an important element of
Australian television. For example in the week Friday 28 April to
Thursday 4 May 1995, over one hundred hours of sports-related
programming were broadcast over five channels (including sports news,
coverage of various matches, and discussions of these games). Aboriginal
sportspeople played an important part in this coverage. For a large section
of the Australian population, their impressions of Aboriginality will
involve these representations. Yet this appears to be little recognised by
academic work.

There is a history of writing on Aboriginality and sport. Richard Broome
has produced work on Aboriginal boxers (1979); Jock Given has written on
Aboriginal participation in the Olympics (1995); John Mulvaney has
worked on Aboriginal cricketers (1967); Warren Clements and Dave Nadel
have contributed to a historical account of Aboriginal participation in
football (Clements, 1991; Nadel, 1993); and Colin Tatz's work has dealt
with rugby, running, boxing and football (1987). It is possible to point to a
critical tradition which already recognises the historical inclusion of
Aboriginal people in these sports, and a similar exclusion from others
(archery, bowls, fencing, golf, polo, swimming and yachting — Tatz, 1987:

3).  These works suggest that Aboriginal people have played an important part in Australian sport for over a century.  However, there appears to be no writing on the television coverage of these sports.  The ways in which Aboriginal performance is distributed in television texts, and in which success in such an important area of Australian life is constructed, have remained invisible.  While histories concern themselves with the material experiences of individual sportspeople, there is no work on the way images of these sportspeople and their successes are communicated to wider populations.

## C.4.3

That this is the case may be due simply to television's perceived status as a 'window on the world'.  In a situation where television is presenting coverage of an already occurring event — one which is not created solely for television, but exists before and without any tv coverage — it may be tempting to employ a model in which broadcasting is understood to be a relay rather than a creative medium.  With little understanding of the ways in which tv constructs 'real' events, critical writing on the representation of Aboriginality can concentrate on the pro-filmic event of sport itself, without any address to its construction by television.  Writing on football, boxing and running occurs only in the area of history, or a cultural theory which embraces sport.  TV coverage of sport has not been a focus of film and television studies. But it is misleading for work on Aboriginal representation to ignore the 'television' in 'television sport'.  Writing on Aboriginality in sport is emphatically not the same thing as writing on television's coverage of Aboriginality in sport.  As a medium, television is not, and never has been, a 'window on the world'.  Rather, it is involved — in sport as much as news and other coverage — in a process of constructing an intelligible narrative from the raw footage of the actuality which occurs before the cameras.

## C.4.4

In order to present a manageable case study, this work focuses on a single sport — Australian Rules football. This game, and its umbrella organisation, the Australian Football League, are obsessions in Victoria (although its movement also into New South Wales, Queensland, South and West Australias cannot be ignored). For this reason, the current analysis must be understood as being local in character: sport in Australia has remained very much a segregated affair, determined by state. So, while rugby has dominated New South Wales, Australian Rules Football has been an important focal point for Victorian culture. The focus on AFL in this work thus represents a particular slant on Aboriginality and sport, and should not be read as representative across all of Australia[2]. It may, in fact, even downplay the Aboriginal presence in sport — Christopher Hallinan suggests that in New South Wales, the Aboriginal presence in rugby league is even more significant: Aboriginal players in that sport, he finds, represent nine per cent of all professional players (Hallinan, 1991: 75).

The coverage of an AFL match is not a neutral relay. Rather, the television text presents only particular elements of the game. Indeed, the coverage of an AFL match is a particularly neat example of the way in which television necessarily constructs an interpretation of pro-filmic events. It is a theoretical commonplace that the mere act of choosing to point the camera at one object or event, rather than at another, is in itself an act of interpretation. In television's coverage of an AFL match, this process is explicitly played out. There are thirty-six players present on the AFL football ground. At any given time, the television screen will show somewhere between one and ten of these players: it thus limits, quite explicitly, interpretations as to which of these thirty-six players should be regarded as the focus of interest. This process of focusing interest in a football match is not always as straightforward as it might at first appear. Although, as might be expected, coverage tends to favour the player holding the ball, this is not always the case. In particular, after a dynamic moment (a kick, a tackle, a spectacular mark), the camera will often present a mid-shot of a single player who is judged to have been

particularly important in that movement.  The player may be running
back down the pitch, or waiting for a bounce: he does not have the ball.
The camera insists, however, that at this point in the game, that player is
interesting — his contribution to the previous movement should be read
as central.

Similarly, the commentary of a football match renders that match
intelligible.  Television commentary of AFL games is not simply a matter
of telling viewers who holds the ball at a given time.  It is rather a process
of continual narrativisation:  the commentators state who is holding the
ball, what he is doing with it, whether he should in fact be doing this,
what the implications are of his choices, what he might better have done,
and so on.  Interpretations are made in terms of personal histories, team
histories, and game histories.  The process of a ball being passed between
thirty-six players is rendered legible and meaningful, constructed into a
narrative featuring characters, movement, histories and dramatic
tensions.  In short, the television coverage of an AFL match presents a
cultural artefact quite distinct from the pro-filmic game itself.  The
television text of a football game is not the same thing as that game
experienced without the mediation of the broadcast medium[3].

Also, AFL coverage on television involves far more than just footage
from matches.  Secondary texts such as sports news contribute to
representation of Aboriginality in the sport of AFL.  For example, a
celebrated success story in the 1994-1995 television season was *The Footy
Show*.  This Channel Nine program features absolutely no footage of any
games (Channel Seven holds exclusive rights to all AFL matches),
focusing rather on discussion of sport, and (what publicity for the show
refers to as) 'locker room banter' (Anon, 'Worst of...', 1995).  Featuring
individual football players, it allows them to emerge as 'personalities',
partaking of games and sketches, and making jokes at each other's
expense.  This formula has been copied in Channel Seven's hastily-
assembled response, *4 Quarters*, a program which similarly presents a
regular studio team of footballer/personalities, and the performance of
games and skits.  These programs present another level of the media
coverage of football, one which takes the game itself more as a background
than a direct subject of interest, and presents rather a series of individual

players as behind-the-scenes 'real' people. Again, this makes clear that television coverage of Aboriginality in sport should not be collapsed into arguments about the pro-filmic fact of Aboriginal sportspeople.


## C.4.5

As a gesture in a direction which has not previously been explored, it is possible to map briefly the way in which Aboriginal players are constructed in television coverage of Australian Rules football. Five matches were randomly chosen in the 1995 AFL season: Fremantle vs Geelong (21.4.95); Collingwood vs Essendon (25.4.95); Footscray vs Fremantle (29.4.95); Richmond vs Brisbane (29.4.95); and West Coast vs Melbourne (29.4.95). Each of these matches was covered in some way by Channel Seven. In looking for Aboriginal presence in the coverage, the main concern was, at first, merely with Aboriginal visibility — the degree to which Aboriginal players were present on the screen during coverage of these games. In addressing this issue, two factors must be borne in mind.

Firstly, the visibility of Aboriginal players will depend to some degree on the pro-filmic event. Research by Christopher Hallinan on positional segregation in the New South Wales rugby league suggests that Aboriginal players tend to be placed in positions which get less access to the ball, and are thus less central in play (Hallinan, 1991). This may also be the case in AFL: in which case television coverage, tending to follow the recognised centre of the action (where the ball is) would consequently render Aboriginal players less visible. Secondly, and bearing this in mind, it may also be that the televisual coverage constructs Aboriginal players in particular ways so that even when they might normally be visible (after handling the ball) they are less so. For example, in choosing on which player to focus after a manoeuvre, a white rather than an Aboriginal player might be granted a solo shot. These two elements — the pro-filmic and the televisual — must be borne in mind when discussing Aboriginal visibility in Channel Seven's coverage of AFL games.

In each one of the these five matches there was some Aboriginal presence. In the Fremantle vs Geelong match, the West Australian team played

Scotty Chisholm on the back line and Dale Kickett at half-back.  In the
Collingwood vs Essendon match, the latter team featured three Aboriginal
players:  Michael Long on the centre line, Che Cockatoo-Collins at half-
forward and Gavin Wanganeen on the back.  Footscray vs Fremantle once
again featured Chisholm and Kickett playing for Fremantle.  The
Richmond vs Brisbane match involved a single Aboriginal player,
McAdam for Brisbane, who came on as an interchange player.  Finally, in
the match between the West Coast and Melbourne, each side fielded one
Aboriginal player:  Chris Lewis playing forward for the Eagles, and Sean
Charles at half-forward for the Demons.

In the course of the five games, each of the Aboriginal players received
some coverage; that is, all were shown on the screen at some point in the
game.  Each had at least one individual mid-shot in the course of play.
Apart from this basic condition of visibility — that they are actually shown
on the screen — three elements are considered of the particularly
televisual representation of the football matches.

The first is the recognition involved in the subtitles which are
occasionally shown over shots of individual players.  These give the
player's name and statistics; they serve to individualise that player and
suggest his importance in the game.  The second point of consideration is
the commentaries.  Again, these spoken discourses legitimise images (they
are given by 'expert' commentators), serving to draw attention to, and
award recognition to, players.  Thirdly, after-match discussions serve to
construct the importance and value of individual players.

In the Fremantle vs Geelong game (21.4.95), both Dale Kickett and Scotty
Chisholm are highly visible.  Playing on the half-back line and the back
line respectively, each displays considerable freedom to move about the
ground and becomes involved in both defensive and offensive play.
Before the game, the Channel Seven commentators pick out several
players of particular interest, the ones to watch.  All are white.  When the
game starts, the first few players who are singled out for individual shots,
and subtitles with their names and stats, are also white.  At first, the
Aboriginal players are not particularly visible.  But when the ball goes out
of play, it is Chisholm who gets to kick it in; a role he will play many times

in the course of the game.  At each kick-in, he is given an individual shot, often for several seconds.  This alone renders him visible in this match.

Kickett remains less visible for a time.  After one movement in which he is involved, it is rather a white player, 'Peter Mann', who gets his name up on the screen.  This is an example of the way in which such devices render explicit television's necessary interest in focusing attention: Kickett is involved but Mann is singled out.  As the game progresses, more players are rewarded after particular movements, with solo shots and their names on the screen.

As the play progresses, both Scotty Chisholm and Dale Kickett emerge as more visible: the former seems to be particularly adept at marking, the latter is often shown running with the ball.  In the first quarter, Kickett is eventually given an individual shot, and is granted the recognition of his name and stats appearing on the screen — 'Dale Kickett, no 11, 50 AFL games'.  This will occur several times throughout the game: Kickett's second set of stats provide his height, weight and age (ht 181cm, Wt 78kg, Age 26).  Strangely, despite often having the ball, and often being featured in individual shots either marking, running or kicking in, Chisholm's name and stats are never subtitled on the screen.  As other elements (the focus of the camera, commentaries and post-match interpretations) serve to centre him, this absence is a strange one.

The work of the match commentators also serves to draw attention to Chisholm and Kickett.  The commentators voice explicit praise for both — Kickett 'loves to run with the footy — but unselfishly'; Chisholm: '... really can run here, Chisholm, good kick to Ridley'; 'Chisholm, well done, to Delaney'.  'Chisholm and Kickett have been quite brilliant in this first quarter'; and so on.  Throughout the game, both of these players are consistently involved in the action, often visible.  The two of them are, as one commentator says, 'springboards for attack' in the match.

If players are not accorded the distinction of close-up shots, names on screen, or commentator voice-over, it is easy for them to remain largely invisible on the football ground.  Thirty-six men are involved in the match.  In the kind of long-shot which displays most of the field, players

are tiny, mostly unrecognisable.  Without these particular televisual conventions to make clear where to look and what to see, a player could well remain invisible during the length of a match.

After the match, the Channel Seven coverage features an interview with the captain of Fremantle (white); and then the two (white) studio anchors discuss the game.  Both Chisholm and Kickett are mentioned in this conversation, and are constructed as central to the game.  Kickett was: 'one of the best three on the ground'; while Chisholm was apparently: 'the best player on the ground'; 'he really breaks open the opposition'.  In fact, when one of the studio anchors, Ian Robertson, comes to give his votes on the best players in the match, he singles out Scotty Chisholm, an Aboriginal player, as the best man on the ground.

In this match, the two Aboriginal players are visible during most of the game; they are singled out in individual mid-shots; Kickett has his name repeatedly put on the screen; and commentators both during and after the game single them both out for particular attention.  There are thirty-six men involved in this game of Australian Rules football: the two Aboriginal players (already a statistical over-representation, in comparison with the population in general) are rendered insistently visible by Channel Seven's coverage of this Fremantle vs Geelong match.  It already becomes apparent that generalised comments about Aboriginal absence must be reassessed.

In the Collingwood vs Essendon game of 25.4.95, the three Aboriginal players in the latter team once again ensure an Aboriginal visibility.  Che Cockatoo-Collins, in particular, seems to be central to the play, and his name appears subtitled several times.  Both Michael Long and Gavin Wanganeen are mentioned by commentators in the course of play.  The last of these players provides an interesting example of Aboriginal presence.  In this particular game, Wanganeen is not highly visible; his name is not shown in the highlights, and he seems to be little involved in the match.  Even more relevant is the fact that, when he is seen, he is not immediately visible as Aboriginal.  However, Gavin Wanganeen is one of the best known Aboriginal footballers in AFL.  A Brownlow medal winner in 1993 (the Brownlow medal is awarded to the player judged by the AFL

umpires to have been, over the course of the season, the 'best and fairest'), Wanganeen has made his Aboriginality a central part of his public identity.  With such a high profile, even though he has little coverage in this game, and even though he might not be immediately visible as 'Aboriginal', it is unlikely that Wanganeen is easily rendered invisible: each mention of his name provides a message about the presence of an Aboriginal player.

The televisual construction of this game seems to place the Aboriginal player Michael Long as a central part of Essendon's game; and Cockatoo-Collins also scores several goals in the course of the game, rendering him obvious.  The latter player is rendered even more visible when covered by the camera in the slow-time when nothing in particular is happening: the coverage features individual shots of him walking down the pitch, waiting for a kick-in, and so on.  Towards the end of the game, the commentators focus on Cockatoo-Collins:  'What a game he's played...magnificent!'.  The Aboriginal players in this match (three out of eighteen Essendon players are Aboriginal) are again rendered highly visible in television's coverage of the game.

In the Footscray vs Fremantle match (29.4.95), Chisholm and Kickett once again play.  Chisholm is again rendered visible in individual shots and comments in voice-over: 'got to his feet as quickly as ever'; 'high-flyer'; 'He's a genius Chisholm'; 'He just does the right thing at the right time'. He also has, in this match, his name subtitled on the screen after successfully tackling and removing the ball from an opponent.  Kickett is similarly a focus of favourable commentator comment:  'Kickett's no slouch'; 'He read that beautifully'.

What is important about these comments is less their favourable nature than the fact that they draw attention to the players.  Indeed, the fact that these are compliments seems to be a generic rather than a personal fact: Channel Seven's football commentaries are often resolutely upbeat.  It remains important, though, that these voice-overs serve to draw attention to the Aboriginal players in the match.

Richmond vs Brisbane (29.4.95) features a single Aboriginal player:
McAdam comes on as an interchange.  He is not as visible as players in the
previous matches, but still has some presence.  When he takes a kick, for
example, he features in his own shot.  His name does not appear subtitled,
but this is less relevant when, as in this case, there appear to be no subtitles
in the coverage of the game.  Later in the match, he is treated to several
shots by himself; and the commentators draw attention to him with
comments such as 'have a look at that, great play by McAdam'; and 'great
kick from McAdam'.  His visibility is certainly not as high as that of
Chisholm, for example; but as one player in a field of thirty-six, he does
not appear to be under-represented.  In this match he is neither a star, nor
invisible.

The final match under consideration, the Eagles vs the Demons (West
Coast vs Melbourne, 29.4.95) is the only game in which there are
Aboriginal players on both sides:  Chris Lewis for the West Australian
team, Sean Charles for the Victorian one.  Lewis is a highly visible player,
whose identity as both Aboriginal and a troublemaker is well known
(Baum, 1994; Connolly, 1994).  Charles is less well known.  In this game,
neither is centred as Chisholm has been, but both become visible.  Each
has his name subtitled on the screen at suitable points in the game.  Lewis'
marks are accorded individual shots, and commented on favourably by
the voice-overs.  Charles later gets some attention, and his name on the
screen, after kicking a ball into the goal mouth, setting up a point-blank
shot for another player.  Lewis becomes more visible later in the game,
giving instructions to other players, running and pointing out where they
should go.  His marks continue throughout the game, and are granted
suitable coverage.  Again, neither player is constructed as central to the
match, but neither do they recede into obscurity.  The after-match
discussion includes an interview with Jason Ball (white player), David
Bourke (white player), and with Craig Turley (white player).  A quick
highlights' tape of the match includes Sean Charles' kick to the
goalmouth: and a run through the players 'who stand out' includes the
comment that Lewis 'was relatively well-held tonight', but his position in
the game meant that he 'obviously got less of the ball'.

The point of these descriptions has been solely to establish presence; to show that not only do Aboriginal players compete in AFL competitions, but that the television coverage of matches *shows* them competing, rendering visible their performance in the form of a broadcast text.  The level of interpretation necessary in describing the texts has so far tried to remain at the level of generic codes which make players visible in Channel Seven's AFL coverage.  The point of this chapter is that there are no interpretive schemata in place, in academic or journalistic discourses, to write these representations into a wider arena of Aboriginal media presence.  In the absence of such approaches, these images vanish; it is difficult to interpret the Aboriginality they present.


## C.4.6

It is possible to extrapolate from other academic approaches some suggestions of ways in which these images might be interpreted — and thus might be written into histories of Aboriginal representation.

As noted above, there is a history of writing on Aboriginal presence in sport.  However, an attention to the pro-filmic events themselves, rather than on televisual representation of those events, has meant the phenomenon has been discussed in particular ways.  One popular interpretative schema has been a materialist one which asks whether sport is a good or a bad thing for those individual Aboriginal people who are actually involved in playing.  Personal narratives are used in some writing to illustrate questions of sport's ability to offer a 'way out' to individuals, celebrating the possibilities offered by sport.  This work suggests that involvement in sports can offer mobility to Aboriginal people.  Richard Broome, for example, in his early writing, suggests that:

> Boxing certainly offered Aborigines opportunities that they might no otherwise have had...[it] gave the successful fighter houses, cars and an urban lifestyle of some comfort...Besides the potential financial rewards, all Aboriginal boxers, especially the topliners, earned respect and social prestige. They became someone and gained self-confidence (Broome, 1979: 30, 31; see also Dave Nadel, 1993: 50; and Colin Tatz, 1987: 41).

By contrast to this common-sense approach — that sport offers a way for individual Aboriginal people to gain financial success and renown — there is a more substantial body of academic work which argues that sport is not in fact liberatory, even for those Aboriginal individuals who succeed.  Such a view is expounded by Richard Broome in a later article:

> ...most commentators would agree that few boxers end up with much money...a boxing career usually interferes with the development of other occupational skills and thus at the end of his career, the boxer is left occupationally unprepared to face the world...Overall, boxing did not prove to be a way out for Aborigines...Boxing has done more to reinforce the basic oppression of Aborigines than to overcome it (Broome, 1980: 50, 69; see also Hallinan, 1991: 73; Nadel, 1993: 49; and Tatz, 1987: 8,9).

The most extreme version of these materialist arguments can be found in the American context where several writers have argued the promotion of black participation in sports has been detrimental to black culture in that country, in its concomitant exclusion of its young people from education (the 'jock-trap' — Tatz, 1984: 14; H Edwards, 1970: xvii; John Gaston, 1986: 380).

In short, Aboriginal participation in sport can be read as an 'enervating myth', offering possibilities of success which are short-lived and open to very few (Tatz, 1984: 14; see also Jack Olsen, quoted in Ernest Cashmore, 1982: 207; Pamela Wonsek, 1992: 452).  In this schema, Aboriginal participation in sport might be deplored for the false hopes of social mobility it offers: hopes which are unlikely to be fulfilled, even should an individual be successful in a sport.


## C.4.7

Related to these concerns with the exploitation of individual athletes is a series of interpretations of black involvement in sport which assert that the black players are largely powerless in a white game.  Black players in fact make (relatively) little money for themselves from their skills; the skills of black sportsmen are exploited by white interests.  This

interpretation of black sporting involvement is more common in writing on the American context, where the visibility and dominance of black participation in sports has demanded an academic reaction.  In short:

> Blacks do not own any of the teams, stadiums or courts on which the games are played...Black participation in professional sports is basically reduced to being the capital which makes the business profitable (John Gaston, 1986: 381).

The objectification implied in this process — the reduction of a human being to capital — is found to be not only a material reality, but a textual concern:

> ...although the sporting event itself is dominated by black players, these images are mitigated and undercut by the overwhelming predominance of white images, some of which represent individuals in positions of authority (Pamela Wonsek, 1992:  453).

In this reading, the white nature of the sports played renders the black players not just alienated capital, but also visible objects of white power (Tatz, 1987: 44;  Broome, 1980: 69).


## C.4.8

Another interpretation of television's coverage of Aboriginal sportspeople might worry that the representation of black achievement in sport is a dangerous thing because it reinforces ideas that black people are primarily physical, and white people primarily intellectual, beings.  Broome, for example, believes that: 'boxing reinforced the prevailing racial stereotypes, rather than challenged them...to the European majority, Aboriginal sportsmen only have a body, not a mind' (Broome, 1980: 69; see also Wonsek, 1992: 449).  This argument appears to be less dominant than the others.  As well as a series of academic arguments against the 'essential' nature of Aboriginal sporting achievement — including Colin Tatz's memorable comment that: 'blacks excel where they are hungry, and needy...' (Tatz, 1984: 13) — it now seems that journalistic descriptions of

Aboriginal prowess manage to avoid crude generalisations about the black's physical nature (see, for example, the opposing arguments of Flanagan, 1995 and Tatz, 1995 — although arguing on opposite sides, neither invokes such insulting ideas).

In all of these approaches to Aboriginal participation in sport, the presence of indigenous sportspeople is apparently something to be lamented.

### C.4.9

Each of these approaches to interpreting Aboriginal presence in sport suffers from a lack of attention to the nature of television's images of Aboriginal sportsmen as just that: images. In their material focus, they interpret the experiences of individual black athletes: but not the place of television coverage in the wider sphere of Aboriginal representation in Australian films and television programs. AFL matches do not exist merely as pro-filmic events, but enter wider public circulation as televisual texts; this fact makes possible quite other approaches to interpreting these images.

The lack of stable interpretive approaches to this area leaves the Aboriginal presence in television sport open to a variety of interpretive practices. For instance, it is possible to mobilise earlier film and television theory in order to produce quite pessimistic interpretations of this phenomenon. It could, for example, be argued that Aboriginal players are objectified in television's coverage of sport. As with Pamela Wonsek's argument about American television's presentation of basketball, it is possible to argue that black Australian players remain the objects of systems beyond their control: in these AFL matches, as in the basketball which Wonsek describes, the camera pans the crowd to show the white faces of fans; pre-match shots reveal the coaches as white; and adverts shown during the game involve no Aboriginal faces. Most importantly, the commentators narrating the games of AFL football are all white: and it is true that Aboriginal players are given no voice in the game.

Indeed, one of the peculiarities of television's coverage of football is that the thirty-six players who are the focus of the entire event — are, indeed, the objects of so much attention — have no voice in the tv coverage of the game.  Not wired for sound, they remain corporeal beings, communicating solely through physical expressions.  Paying attention to the tertiary football texts of *The Footy Show* and *Four Quarters*, interpretations of Aboriginal objectification could be made even more pessimistic.  For in fact, not all football players remain voiceless on television.  In a whole level of non-coverage programs, footballers appear in roles other than the physical: as interviewees and as personalities.  In after match interviews, and particularly in the two football programs mentioned above, players are allowed to speak and to emerge as characterised subjects.  *The Footy Show*, for example, has a regular team of ex- and present footballers who present the show: notably Sam Newman and Dermott Brereton.  The members of this core team emerge as the dominant 'personalities' of the show; they are fully in control of the program, they are articulate, amusing and intelligent, and they represent the familiar, visible, fully-subjectified centre of the program.  All are white.  Other players appearing on the show are mediated through this group: they appear on the show less to talk, than to participate in silly games and act as the butt of jokes.  The production office insists that the program has featured Aboriginal players in this a role — 'but not to make an issue of it' (Neil, 1994); such Aboriginal appearances are not a regular occurrence.  Finally, *The Footy Show* also features players in lesser roles, appearing in taped segments outside of the studio.  In the episode of 27 April 1995, for example, one Aboriginal player is visible in the end credits, standing as part of his team, mouthing the words of the closing song.

4 *Quarters* features a similar set-up.  Again, an all-white regular central team features 'personality' footballers (Wayne Carey, Tony Modra, Tim Watson).  Again, some players are invited into the studio to join in at a lesser level (as a newer program, it seems no Aboriginal players have yet taken this role).  Finally, other players appear in brief, taped segments.

It is true, then, to say that television coverage of football works to keep Aboriginal footballers voiceless.  In the terms of Wonsek and of Gaston, their status as objects of a capitalistic enterprise is continued by their status

as objects for the television camera.  In fact, in the course of the week under consideration here, not a single Aboriginal footballer was heard to speak on television.  In none of the interviews, commentaries, football entertainment shows, was an Aboriginal voice heard.

## C.4.10

This represents one interpretive schema which could possibly be mobilised in order to write Aboriginal football presence into wider accounts of television representation.  In an area which has not yet been stabilised by repeated journalistic or academic debate, such an approach remains merely speculative; and is indeed easily challenged.

To begin with, the model of the objectified Aboriginal sportsman does not take account of the full spectrum of Aboriginal representation on Australian television.  The example of the evening of the 29 April 1995 is particularly instructive.  Three AFL matches were covered on Channel Seven that night.  Firstly, highlights were shown from Footscray vs Fremantle; and then from Richmond vs Brisbane.  However, in the slot between the end of these highlights and the start of the full three hour coverage of the match between the West Coast Eagles and Melbourne Demons, there was another Channel Seven program:  *Gladiators*.  This version of a highly successful US and UK television format is a form of sports game show.  As this program presents a series of contests which rely on physical strength and stamina, involving elements of wrestling, running, hurdling and climbing, it is not unreasonable to count *Gladiators* as a part of Channel Seven's sports programming.  If this is allowed, then the show changes the landscape of Aboriginal sports presence: for the male host of the first season of that program (broadcast during the survey period) was Aboriginal; while the contestants are mostly white.

Aaron Pedersen is visibly Aboriginal.  He is also well known from intertextual situations as Aboriginal, having previously hosted the ABC's Aboriginal magazine program, *Blackout*.  Pedersen's presence in this 'sports' program is very much as a non-physical being.  And whereas Aboriginal footballers in the AFL matches shown before and after

*Gladiators* do not talk, Aaron Pedersen's role is to do nothing but.  As the host of the show, he talks directly to the camera: it is he who mediates between the viewers of the program and the contestants.  In contrast to the spectacular exertions of the contestants, all he does is talk.  After each event, as the competitors lie gasping on the floor, it is his job to encourage them to speak, trying to sustain (obviously very difficult) conversations. The (white) contestants are physical, exhausted and largely non-verbal: Aaron is the host, given the task of representing and maintaining a verbal presence on the program.

As well as inhabiting a verbal position, Aaron is also visually excluded from the physical side of the program.  The contestants are all heavily muscled, dressed in skimpy lycra costumes which draw attention to their bodies.  The third set of people in the program, the Gladiators themselves (the show's own Goliaths, whom the contestants must try to defeat) are dressed in even more revealing costumes and are overmuscled to the point of excess.  Compared to these two groups of very physical presences (contestants and Gladiators), the hosts of the program (both Aaron and co-host Kimberley Joseph) are insistently non-physical.  In contrast to the body-hugging stretch fabrics of the physical groups, Aaron and Kimberley are dressed stylishly and nattily, she in a mini-skirt and big boots, he in a neat, very trendy suit.  His dress, combined with his slender build, large mouth, and slight lisp, makes this Aboriginal host an almost effete figure. Arguments that television coverage of Aboriginal sportspeople renders them voiceless objects might be countered with an indication towards the Aboriginal presence as non-physical host, guardian of the verbal arena, in *Gladiators*.

As suggested above, then, the model of objectification is only one speculative approach to discussing Aboriginal television programs — and it proves to be assailable from other positions too.  Another attack could come from a position in film theory sensitive to the complexities of object/subject relations.

This commonplace distinction in film studies, between those objectified and those offered subjectivity, relies on interpretations of voice, and of point of view shots.  Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke suggest, as they

stress the importance of an approach which is sensitive to the filmic nature of Aboriginal images, it is necessary to ask: '...from whose point of view is the shot taken? Who is privileged in close ups? Who is allowed to speak?' (Moore and Muecke, 1984: 40). As was suggested in Chapter A.1, in the interpretive structures of film theory and of subaltern studies, speech has been seen to convey subjectivity; while to lack the power of speech is to be objectified (Mulvey, 1989a: 16; Fanon, 1967: 7; Spivak, 1990: 31). To be an object is to be available to be looked at, with no similar right to look back; and with no power to control the interpretations which will be made of one's visible self. Object status is undesirable and implies a powerless state: subjectivity implies control. A typical invocation of this dichotomy in relation to Aboriginal representation can be seen in Hickling-Hudson's piece, 'White construction of black identity...' (Hickling-Hudson, 1990).

However, as Jean Baudrillard has suggested, it is possible to make other readings of the relationship between an object and subject: readings in which the implied dichotomy of such a relationship is challenged (Baudrillard, 1990). In the interpretation Baudrillard suggests — one which relies on examples of the potency of the feminine even in situations where it is objectified — the object may well be able to sustain and defend itself; may, in fact, be in as powerful a position as a subject.

Even without entering such abstract debates, it is possible to ask whether the Aboriginal players in television coverage of AFL matches are, in fact, objectified. While it is literally true that Aboriginal players are voiceless in the coverage of AFL matches, such a statement only takes account of vocal communication. It may be necessary to acknowledge that physical expressions can be equally well understood as conveying subjectivity; and that Aboriginal footballers, even though they are literally voiceless, are not objectified — they signal subjectivity through physical expression. Bain Attwood worries that Aboriginalism: 'renders Aborigines as inert objects who are spoken for by others' (Attwood, 1992: xi). Certainly, Aboriginal football players are spoken for by others; but they are by no means inert.

Chris Lewis, Aboriginal football star of the West Coast Eagles, points towards an alternative interpretation of objectification when he suggests that: 'The sporting field has been the only place where Aboriginal people could...express themselves fully' (Lewis, quoted in Baum, 1994: 4). The physical performance of Aboriginal football playing, even if it is rendered in purely visual modes, can still be understood as 'expression'. Indeed, it is common-sensical to argue that such physical expressions can be understood as communication: semaphore, sign-language and interpretations of dance would be illustrations of such an understanding. If physical movements are understood as communication in this way, they can as well be used to recognise 'subjectivity' as can verbal expressions. It can be argued that Aboriginal football players create expressive movements; and these can be interpreted as implying a subject-presence. A graceful or spectacular mark by Chisholm; an impressive run in which Kickett outmanoeuvres two opponents; even the sight of Chris Lewis giving orders to team-mates, pointing and obviously formulating a plan; in each of these, communication can be implied. It is possible to interpret subjectivity from these physical movements, to assert that they are not random messages from 'natural', uncomprehending but athletic players; to rather see them as the result of skill, training and intelligence. Such interpretations would accord to players a status as thinking subjects — not just as instinctive objects.

Similarly, the control of speech by commentators might seem to imply the objectivity of silent players. However, such an interpretation can be seen as misguided; or, at least, as generically insensitive. In the interpretation made by Wonsek, a television text showing whites in positions of authority is reinforcing the idea that Aboriginal players are the objects of their rule. However, it is possible to make quite other interpretations. In the game of AFL football, for example, players are central. Everyone else involved in the sport is secondary. Umpires, for example, are universally loathed. Of commentators, it might be said that 'those who can, do; those who can't do, commentate'. Even if a commentator is a once-famous footballer, he is unlikely still to be actively involved in the game. Although these people may hold a status as privileged voices and interpreters, commentators are essentially secondary presences. It is

unlikely that a commentator will ever be accorded the respect given a footballer who has played well. It is possible to re-write that interpretation of subjectivity which sees the voice as privileged expression, and to rather say of commentators that their speech is in fact the mark of their secondary position: in the game of AFL, they can only talk about; while footballers actually do it. Using such a common-sense formulation, it is possible to think of speech as revealing a position less highly-valued than that of physical action — indeed, of being a mark of lack of potency. It is perfectly conceivable that a fan could reject a particular pronouncement by a commentator, a proffered interpretation of a physical act by a favoured player, and instead insist on understanding the player's work in other terms. The commentators, and their voices, remain secondary: the players and their physical performance are central, the respect offered them primary.

In searching for a suitable conceptual schema through which to interpret television images of Aboriginal sporting presence, charges of objectification can be countered with arguments challenging assumptions about the function of speech and sight in the assignment of subjectivity, as well as with examples of Aboriginal television personalities appearing in quite other 'sports' roles.

## C.4.11

Other interpretive approaches might be found. In considering television images as images, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that black sportspeople reach far wider populations in this form than they do in the physical fact of the pro-filmic event; and that these images are available for consumption in ways specific to the medium of television.

The Aboriginal respondents in Lester Bostock's survey *From the Dark Side*, suggest a way of discussing Aboriginal sports presence which does not insist on negative interpretations: using the terminology of 'role models'. One respondent, when questioned about what s/he would like to see on television, asks for: 'Role models...Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sportsmen and women' (Bostock, 1993: 19). Unfortunately, this

area has been so little explored that the vocabulary which is available to discuss it remains banal, sounding distressingly like 'common-sense'. For example, Aboriginal audiences might find in a spectacular mark by Scotty Chisholm, or a great run by Dale Kickett, the space for reactions such as pride, excitement or identification. Such feelings — the pride of success by an individual with whom one recognises affiliation — are little accounted for in traditional accounts of television watching. It is an extension of this idea which is mobilised in the comments of Bostock's respondents. The vocabulary they bring to the discussion of the television images of Aboriginal sportspeople is not one in which these people are rendered 'objects'; but rather one in which they become 'role models'. It is a terminology which carries little theoretical weight: and the lack of work in this area makes detailed discussion of the function of such 'role models' difficult. Again commonsensically, such images — of an affiliated person being successful — might inspire other members of a group to personal successes. The process is not one which has been mapped in much detail: in particular, a difficult question is the degree to which the feelings which might be inspired by role models (pride? hope? inspiration? excitement?) are transferable to objects other than the role model herself. Such a question has not been much addressed in critical writing. This is an important point if arguments are to be made about the value of images of Aboriginal sportspeople and their use by Aboriginal audiences. For instance, works on black participation in sport, cited above, have made perfectly valid points about the dangers involved in the choice of sport as a career option (premature termination of education; the shortness of the career; the possibility of forcible retirement at thirty with no transferable skills). These are genuine points of concern.

But can images of successful sportspeople inspire audiences only to attempt success in the area of sport? It is a sign of the lack of interest in televisual images of sports people *as* images, that there is an assumption that the role models offered by Aboriginal sportspeople will necessarily lead to Aboriginal movement into sport. This need not be the case. While it seems likely that the visibility of an Aboriginal sportsperson will raise the profile of her sport with the viewing community, it is also reasonable to suggest that many more spectators will be inspired by such

images than will try to enter the sport. It is surely not too far-fetched to hope that images of Aboriginal success — competing in sports, doing something spectacularly well — that these image have other implications than the purely imitative. Again, it is a sign of the lack of work in this area that it is not possible to speak in more assertive terms: but it is possible to frame a question — does an image of a sportsman with whom one feels affiliated doing well inspire feelings that can only be channelled into sports? Or may that 'role model' function more generally as a model of success, providing hope of the ability of affiliated audiences to achieve goals in wider cultural arena?

> I had tears in my eyes when I saw Cathy Freeman win that race and grab the Aboriginal flag. It was as if she was saying, I made it, I've done it — but I'm still Aboriginal. It just makes you so proud (Chris Clarke, quoted in Wilkinson, 1994: 14).

Colin Tatz suggests that:

> ...in the long term, what matters most is that Aboriginal sporting success, however, brief or tragic has given Aborigines more uplift, more collective pride, more kudos, than any other single activity (Tatz, 1987: 45).

While some comments do suggest that the function of role models is strictly literal (Broome, 1979: 30; Tatz, 1984: 14), it is also possible to find suggestions that the inspiration offered by role models can be taken up and applied to the personal situation of an individual. Such a model can be seen underlying comments made by Cathy Freeman upon meeting Evonne Goolagong: 'Even when I was very young, I knew who Evonne was, and that she was an Aboriginal achiever. She's been an inspiration' (quoted in Bideau, 1994: 1). Similarly, Stan Grant suggests that:

> When I was growing up, most of my Aboriginal heroes and role models were sportsmen and women...these people present an inspiring and positive story (Grant, 1993: page unnumbered).

Neither of these Aboriginal people went on to copy strictly their 'role models': Freeman did not become a tennis player, Grant did not become a

sportsman.  Both found in role models a more general message:  a message of the possibility of Aboriginal success.  As Broome puts it:

> ...boxing provided heroes for a people attempting the difficult task of resisting cultural domination.  If an Aboriginal triumphed in the ring, all his people felt like winners (Broome, 1980: 69).

Cathy Freeman makes explicit the hope behind this understanding of the role model:

> It was important for me as a role model to win that race.  Not enough Aborigines have the confidence, the self-esteem or self-belief to get out and do what they really want to do and make something of their own lives (quoted in Given, 1995: 51).

Freeman hopes that the inspiration she offers as a 'role model' will not simply result in a generation of 400m sprinters; but will provide other Aboriginal people with the knowledge that they can succeed: a knowledge which they can translate into personal terms, into something which is relevant to 'what they really want to do', to 'their own lives'.  This is a far more optimistic view of the function of a successful Aboriginal sportsperson who becomes a 'role model'.  Of course, it must be deplored that the career options available to Aboriginal people are limited, along with access to education.  As more Aboriginal people succeed in different areas, different images may be circulated in television and other media. This will help to insist that Aboriginal people can succeed in areas other than sport (see the enthusiasm of Bostock's respondents for the 'role model' represented by Stan Grant).

Any actual material difficulty which prevents Aboriginal people from entering careers other than sport must insistently be described as unacceptable.  However, images of Aboriginal people who have been successful are potent images in modern Australian society.

## C.4.12

Aboriginal representation in television sports coverage has not been written into wider accounts of film and television Aboriginal images. The lack of sanctioned interpretive schemata for this project in fact renders it difficult to discuss such a presence in a meaningful way. This chapter has considered two possible approaches, both sensitive to the specificity of the televisual medium, both of which might allow these images to be circulated in academic and journalistic arenas. A negative interpretation of the images as objectification is rejected as unhelpful; while a more optimistic approach, one which celebrates the function of 'role models', is posited as a way in which these images could be read hopefully.

Without any interpretive schema, though, the visible fact of these images in fact becomes an absence, vanishing from considerations of filmic and televisual Aboriginalities. It is necessary to institute interpretive approaches in order to render these very real Aboriginal presences visible for academic and journalistic representations of Australian Aboriginality in the media.

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[1] This work was done as part of a survey by the Centre for Research in Contemporary Culture at Murdoch University.

[2] With West Australia currently boasting two AFL teams, and a huge upsurge in local interest (94,000 people attended the Fremantle vs Geelong game in West Australia on 21.4.95), the AFL does represent an important example of Aboriginal sporting presence in Australia.

[3] This is even more the case when, as is often the case in Victoria, the television broadcast is not of the whole match, but of a series of 'highlights' — an already digested version of the match, explicitly edited to make sense and present only the important parts.

# Conclusion

# Making *Jedda* mean

## 1

*Jedda* is...

not exhausted by accounts of its 'sickening' racism; nor is its importance completely explained by assertions that it is the best representation of Aborigines in white film-making. *Jedda* is a text whose interpretation is involved in a complex series of limiting, culturally specific discourses. The chapters of this thesis have explored some of the ways in which meaning might be closed down in relation to Aboriginality in filmic and televisual texts. Having looked at and from a variety of perspectives, it is possible to return to the founding text of this thesis (and of Australian writing on filmic Aboriginality): *Jedda*

## 2

*Jedda* is....

a feature film. As is suggested in Chapter A.1, feature films are supposed to be consumed in particular ways. It is unsurprising in Western culture that the normative mode of watching a film is in a public space, in darkness, facing the screen, the prevailing silence broken only in reaction to isolated moments of excitement, delight or dread. When *Jedda* is consumed in such a way, the intensely visual nature of its communicative strategies makes sense, and they are allowed to carry a weight of meaning. That the text communicates in this way is not surprising. *Jedda* is, after all: 'Australia's first colour feature film' (Leigh, 1988: 84), and the film's textual sumptuousness has been commented upon by critics:

> ...the environment is magnificently filmed, showing intensely green, undulating
> stretches of tropical plain, bare mountains, red-gold deserts and deep
> canyons (Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 266)

*Jedda* watched on television is a very different text from *Jedda* watched in
the cinema: in the arena for which it was designed, the visual mode of
communication is promoted and it becomes obvious that this is a film less
about Aboriginality and settler relations than about 'black' and 'white'
histories (Hickling-Hudson, 1990) — precisely marked by colour.  In the
cinema-text of *Jedda*, identities are visual and material things: Joe's half-
caste status is clearly marked by his blackface appearance, Marbuk's by the
intense blackness of his skin[1].

*Jedda* is a feature film.  As is suggested in Chapter A.2, when a film is
viewed in a cinematic context, expectations and desires are set up, and are
satisfied by the excitement and excess — the appeal to fatality — of the text.
This film presents the wild, dangerous sexuality of Aboriginal men, the
tribal rituals of natives, a crocodile fight, finally, spectacular death against
the rugged Australian landscape.  With these glorious, excessive,
dangerous and meaningful representations, the film works to fulfil the
expectations raised by the viewing context, of being an 'event', something
that is larger than life and more than the everyday.  In such a context,
Aboriginal culture is read into a particular space of fascination, danger and
meaningfulness.

3

*Jedda* is....

a Western.  Amongst other things.  Generic status is not a final quality, but
a matter of reading.  *Jedda* can be read against a variety of intertextual sets.
It is an adventure film (Johnson, 1987: 55), legible in terms of Tarzan films
and the appeal of Johnny Weissmuller.  It is a melodrama (Mishra, 1989:
178), its fatal ending comprehensible as a suitable example of overblown
emotionalism.  It is an Australian film (Leigh, 1988: 84), and thus suitable
to be read in terms of a nation's concerns, and also through the name of

an Australian auteur. Such are some of the generic interpretations already in circulation. But generic status is not a stable quantity. It is also possible to read *Jedda* as, for example, a Western. The homestead, the harshness of the landscape and the simple iconic presence of cowboys and horses bring to the film a burden of information for a reader, with a knowledge of goodies and baddies, what it means to have white skin (or a white hat), the dangers of a rugged landscape (such as monument valley), and the place of the natives in that landscape. As is suggested in Chapters B1 and B2, to recognise *Jedda* as a melodrama, an adventure film, an Australian film, a Western, is to read it with particular inflections.

And as some sets of intertexts validate *Jedda* generically, others work to ground the film as part of an oeuvre. *Jedda*:

> ...has a strong authorial presence, an excitement and an awareness of the very radical nature of the experiment itself...Charles Chauvel...had already introduced the Aborigine as an object of legitimate, though melodramatic, knowledge, in *Uncivilised*... (Mishra, 1989: 178)

So, for Stuart Cunningham, a knowledge of Chauvel's other films, and of the director's work on *Jedda* is necessary in order to interpret the film. From this point of view, it is interesting and useful to state that: 'serious anthropological research went into *Jedda*' (Cunningham, 1991: 158), a comment that is obviously not innocent in light of debates as to the adequacy of the film's Aboriginal representations. Colin Johnson similarly invokes the authorial figure of Chauvel in order to explain the film, making less flattering readings of the director's background and intentions:

> Charles Chauvel had a vision of Australia, its landscape and its people, which was akin to that of the *Jindyworobak* poets of the thirties...a development from the writers of the late nineteenth century... (Johnson, 1987: 51)

As was argued in Chapters B.3 and B.4, the possibility of reading an authorial director's voice in this film makes particular interpretations possible. More interestingly, it is becoming obvious in recent critical

writing that the text can be assigned other authorial voices than its director.  And so...

*Jedda* is... a Tracey Moffatt film.  It becomes a commonly circulated fact that Moffatt's film *Night Cries* is explicitly referential to the earlier film (Kaplan, 1989; Periz, 1990; Rutherford, 1990).  As this fact becomes available as a piece of relevant interpretive information it is possible that an act of returning to the first film will involve reading it through the later one.  New interpretations can emerge, particularly sensitive to the relationships between the women in the previous film: interpretations which are aware of alternative possibilities, a situation in which:

> ...the lives and experiences of Jedda and her adoptive mother in Moffatt's
> reconstruction of them are not mediated by men, not by Jedda's adoptive
> white father, nor by Marbuk, the handsome black outlaw/seducer, nor by Joe,
> the sensible, civilised half-caste ringer... (Langton, 1993: 46)

When *Night Cries* becomes part of the oeuvre in which *Jedda* sits, the earlier film is open to interpretations which might not otherwise be obvious, readings in which the relationship between mother and daughter take on levels of meaning not immediately apparent.  This is 'Tracey Moffatt's *Jedda*', a text only recently made accessible.

4

*Jedda* is....

'not a realistic depiction of life', notes Colin Johnson, with no sense of disapproval (Johnson, 1987: 55).  The melodrama and excessive mise-en-scene noted by several commentators render the film ineligible to be discussed as 'realistic'.  This carries certain implications for uses and readings of the text.  *Jedda* is not 'realism', and thus it is not available, for example, as a social document for commentators seeking to bolster their arguments about the current Aboriginal situation.  But, as this thesis has attempted to show, interpretations of a text are not final.  It might seem

commonsensical that *Jedda* cannot be described within discourses of 'realism'; and yet, for Anne Hickling-Hudson, the film works:

> ...to explore sympathetically questions of black identity within a socially realist setting...[Chauvel]...points out that the film is based on actual historical events that took place in twentieth century Australia...(Hickling-Hudson, 1990: 266)

The edges of discursive arenas are not clearly drawn boundaries. As was suggested in Chapter C.1, the discourses of 'realism' may largely work to insist on contemporary, social problem representations of 'negative' issues as being 'realistic': but there is always the possibility that these boundaries will be breached, that a reading might involve wandering casually into, and thoughtlessly claiming a stake in, territory in which it apparently has no interest. Hickling-Hudson is not involved in a terroristic attempt to redefine the bounds of realism. She states simply, and apparently without any awareness of difficulty, that the setting of *Jedda* is 'social realist'. Such an unproblematic statement makes clear the fact that while evaluative criteria may set boundaries on readings, these will always remain open to transgression.

Other familiar interpretive approaches have proven themselves able to structure the textual elements of *Jedda* in meaningful ways. Indeed, as Chapter C.3 made clear, the 'Haskell thesis' has proven to be a popular approach to making sense of this film. 'Tudawali's acting ability enabled the character to escape the ideological bonds the Chauvel's had knotted', suggests Colin Johnson (1987: 53). The performer 'totally dominates the text' (Mishra, 1989: 179), is 'tremendously powerful' (Turner, 1988: 137). Certainly, it is possible to apply this conceptual schema to make an appealing reading of the film: an interpretation which insists not only on Aboriginal authorial control of meaning, but on the fact of that control being subversively gained despite the figure of the white director/dictator. The textual material is certainly present to make such interpretations plausible. But they are not inescapable. Once again, none of these readings must finally be allowed to rest as stable, final statements on what the film 'is'. It might seem that the performance of Robert Tudawali as Marbuk is charismatic, that it demands attention as a central, authorising

source of meaning — that it is, finally, an inescapable textual fact rather than just one possible reading. But this is not the case. As Chapter C.3 argued, the textual characteristics needed to allow readings of charismatic performance through the 'Haskell thesis' are in fact so subjective as to be non-existent. Consider the comments of Andrew Pike, writing on *Jedda* at a time when the Haskell thesis was publicly available (as applied in feminist film writing) but had not been taken up as the critical commonplace in approaching *Jedda*:

> The primal urges underlying the film were stressed in the publicity...and in the
> performances of two full-blood Aboriginals in the leading roles (Ngarla
> Kunoth and Robert Tudawali), which often fell into poses familiar from
> countless Hollywood movies... (Pike, 1977: 598)

For most modern writers, the performance of Tudawali is intensely natural and charismatic. For Pike, it consists of 'poses' (artificial): and worse than that, poses which are 'familiar from countless Hollywood movies' — in short, Tudawali's performance is here seen as derivative and generic; as purely functional in conveying 'the primal urges' which the film as a whole (and thus, director Charles Chauvel) wants to illustrate. As suggested before, debates about charisma, if this quality is perceived to be a textual feature, can finally go no further than, 'Yes he is'. 'No he isn't'. Such is the case with Tudawali's charm.

Finally, with reference to Chapter C.4, *Jedda* is the most overwritten of all Australian films of the Aboriginal. While that chapter worried that particular examples of Australian film and television vanish from consideration of raced representation due to a lack of academic circulation, *Jedda* faces quite the opposite difficulty: this film is required rather to carry the burden of Australian film-making's representation of the Aboriginal. It is overwritten in the sense of having new readings constantly inscribed over the top of existing ones; and in the sense of simply having too much written about it. *Jedda* takes a central place not only in the history of Australian film-making, but in the academic debates about Aboriginal representation — debates which constantly return to the text, forever seeking out something new to say about it, some new way to unlock its secrets, to finally say whether it is, in fact, a good or a bad film.

This thesis began precisely with the confusion of different interpretations and approaches to *Jedda*.  It concludes with the same interpretations, but ordered quite differently.  Obviously, the readings suggested above cannot all be held as 'correct' simultaneously.  Some are contradictory: for example, to read Tudawali as the author of the piece requires seeing the film escaping the 'ideological bonds the Chauvels had knotted'; to read the Chauvels back into the central position correspondingly relegates Tudawali to the position of found object for the white film-maker.  The final position of the thesis, then, is that it is not necessary to argue that one or other of these readings is correct.  No amount of close attention to the text can make such a case.  It will never be possible finally to insist that Tudawali is really, or that Chauvel is really, the author of *Jedda*; simply because for different audiences, reading the film at different times, in different places and in different eras, either, or both, or neither of these positions might be true.  These possibilities are not, of course, infinite.  In fact, at any given time and place they may be quite rigidly circumscribed. What is necessary is to pay close attention to the way in which readings become possible; to suggest why and how they might be privileged; and to sketch the implications of such interpretive practices for readings of Aboriginality more generally.   It is only through the detailed approaches suggested above, through an acknowledgement of the complexities of filmic and televisual texts, and of the more-than-complexities of the interpretations made by audiences, that critical work can finally begin to produce some account of the work of representation which has been performed around Australian Aboriginality — the work of making race mean.

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1 Robert Tudawali is cast for visual appearances: he fits the 'picture'
    Chauvel holds of a 'noble savage' (Johnson, 1987: 52).

## Appendix A: Selected teleography

Relatively complete lists of Aboriginal feature material are already collected[1]. Similarly, non-fictional work is the genre mostly held by State Libraries, and the catalogues of these institutions are helpful in finding this material[2]. Broadcast television, however (particularly in the non-fictional genres) has been less well addressed. This brief appendix suggests some of the material which has been broadcast on the medium, providing at least a hint of a cataloguing process which has hardly even begun[3]. The material listed provides only a glimpse of the material which has been broadcast. Most is not archived, much is entirely lost. It may, however, be possible for interested researchers to view material through the producers or distributors.

### Drama series/serials

*A Country Practice*, 'A Delicate Balance', (transmitted 7.8.89), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, 'An Axe to Grind', JNP for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 2/55/2/56: 'Crimes and misdemeanours', (1993), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 2/63/2/64: 'Thursday's Child', (1993), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 2/67/2/68: 'Carpe diem', (1993), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 2/81/2/82: 'Snakes and ladders', (1993), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 2/87/2/88: 'Cyclone Claire', (1993), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 781/782: 'The Dreamkeeper', (1990), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 917/918: 'Where the wild things are', (1992), JNP, for Channel 7

*A Country Practice*, episode 929/930: 'The Contender', (1991), JNP, for Channel 7

*Archer*, (1985), Roadshow, Coote and Carroll, for Channel 10

*Bellbird*, (1967), ABC

*Blue Heelers*: 'Skin Deep', (8.11.94), Channel 7

*Boney*, (1972-1973), 9 Network/Global/STV/Fauna,

*Bony*: 'Crash course', (29.8.92), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Bony*: 'Looks can kill', (22.8.92), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Bony*: 'Old Medicine', (28.1.92), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Bony*: 'Outrage', (17.10.92), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Bony*: 'Secret File', (26.9.92), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Bony*: 'Under the influence', (3.10.92), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Bony*: pilot episode, (1991), Grundy Productions for Channel 7

*Consider Your Verdict*, (1961), Crawfords

*Delta Force*: 'Blackout', (1969), Tom, Jeffrey, ABC

*Glenview High*, (1977-1979), 7 Network/Grundy

*GP*: 'Carrots and sticks', (25.4.95), ABC

*GP*: 'Beat it', (1992), ABC

*GP*: 'Crossroads', (1992), ABC

*GP*: 'Sloan Street', (1991), ABC

*GP*: 'Special Places', (1994), ABC

*Heartbreak High*, (11.6.95), Gannon Productions for Channel 10

*Heartbreak High*, (21.5.95), Gannon Productions for Channel 10

*Home and Away* (4.10.93 onwards), Channel 7

*Homicide*, (1975), 7 Network/Crawford Productions

*Janus*, (1995), ABC

*Joe Wilson*, (1987), Geoffrey, Nottage, 7 Network/Bigola Beach

*Luke's Kingdom*, (1975), 9 Network/Yorkshire Television

*Neighbours*, (18.10.93), for Channel 10 Grundy Productions

*Neighbours*, (30.12.94 onwards), Grundy for Channel 10

*Neighbours*, (5.11.93), for Channel 10 Grundy Productions

*Number 96*, (1970's), 10 Network/Cash Harmon

*Prisoner*, episodes 659-674, (1986), Grundy

*Rafferty's Rules*, repeated, 7.3.1995, (1989), 7 Network/Amalgamated Productions

*Relative Merits*, (1987), ABC ,

*Rush*, (1974, 1976), ABC

*Skyways*, (1979-1981), 10 Network/Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 1: 'A Will to survive', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 3: 'Hot enough for you', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 6: 'Is nothing sacred?', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 13: 'A Choice of Enemies', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 14: 'Departures', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 21: 'Fearless Frank', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 26: 'Into the Future, pt II', (1986), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 38: 'A Friend of a friend', (1987), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 42: 'A Distant Echo', 1989, Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 53: 'Cries from the heart', (1987), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 59: 'Operating solo', (1987), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 64:'Jacks high', (1987), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 70: 'The Forbidden', (1987), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 74: 'Don't tell anybody', (1988), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 84: 'Breaking the drought', (1988), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 90: 'The Storyteller', (1988), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 99: 'Next to go', (1988), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 108: 'The Longing', (1989), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 112: 'All that glitters', (1989), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 114: 'The Last rodeo', (1989), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 121: 'A Doctor's dreaming', (1990), Crawford
    Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 131: (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 151: 'A Rural education', (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 162: 'Old man weed', (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 172: 'None so blind', (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 179: 'Breaking down the wall', (1990), Crawford
    Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 184: 'Against the current', (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 200: (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 202: 'My little patch', (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Flying Doctors*, episode 219: 'Wimp', (1990), Crawford Productions

*The Man From Snowy* River 2, (1995), Channel 9

*The Outsiders*, (1976), ABC/TVS,

*Whiplash*, (1961), Hecht Hill Lancaster,


**Adverts with Aboriginal presence**

'Buy Australian', transmitted. 11.3.94, Channel 7

ABC ident, (1993), (transmitted 7.9.93), ABC

ABC promo for Aboriginal programming, (1993), ABC

CES advert for job training, (transmitted 5.10.93), Channel 9

CES advert for job training, (transmitted 5.10.93), Channel 9
        Channel 7

Dreamtime II (spiritual music, not specifically Aboriginal), (transmitted 23.10.93),
        ABC

Kakadu National Park, Australian Northern Territory, (1993),

Mitsubi Pajero advert, (1993), Channel 7

Northern Territory, tourism advert, (1993), Channel 7

Vetta pasta, (transmitted 20.10.93), Channel 10


## Comedy programs

*Babakiueria*, (1986), Don, Featherstone, ABC

*Basically Black*, (1973), Nicholas, Parsons, ABC

*Bligh*, (1992), Artists Services

*Dearest Enemy*, (1989/1992), ABC

*Fast Forward*, series 1, (17.5.89), for Channel 7 Artists' Services

*Full Frontal*, (28.10.93), for Channel 7 Artists' Services

*Full Frontal*, episode 9, (1993), for Channel 7 Artists' Services

*The Late Show*, (transmitted 5.9.93), ABC


## Television coverage of events

*4 Quarters*, (21.4.95), Channel 7

*4 Quarters*, (28.4.95), Channel 7

*AFI awards* 1993, (1993), ABC

*AFL Football*, West Coast vs Melbourne, (29.4.95), Channel 7

*AFL Football*: Collingwood vs Essendon, 2(5.4.95), Channel 7

*AFL Football*: Footscray vs Fremantle. Highlights, (29.4.95), Channel 7

*AFL Football*: Fremantle vs Geelong, (21.4.95), Channel 7

*AFL Football*: Richmond vs Brisbane. Highlights, (29.4.95), Channel 7

Cathy Freeman in 1994 Commonwealth Games, in Victoria, Canada, (1994),
        Channel 10

*National Press Club Luncheon*, (15.9.93), ABC

*Once in a Blue Moon*: A Celebration of Australian Musicals, (26.4.94), ABC

*People's Choice Awards*, 1994, (25.11.94), Channel 7

*The Footy Show*, (27.4.95), Channel 9

*The Logie Awards*, (28.4.95), Channel 7

## Television documentaries

*A Long Time Dream*, (1985), SBS

*A Shifting Dreaming*, (1982), Bob Plasto

*Aboriginal Australia*, CAAMA, for Channel 7

*Australian Walkabout*, (1958), Charles, Chauvel, for the BBC

*Beyond The Black Stumps*, (1972), Tom, Haydon, BBC/ABC

*Big country* series: 'Flinders Preserve', (1975), ABC

*Big country* series: 'On Thursday', (1969), ABC

*Big country* series: 'Teach me a new dreamtime' (1983), ABC

*Big country* series: 'The Desert People', (1974), ABC

*Big country* series: 'The Law at Finke', (1971), ABC

*Big country* series: 'The legend of Jimmie Governor', (1977), ABC

*Big country* series: 'White man McLeod', (1974), ABC

*Blood Brothers* series, 'Jardiwarnpa', Ned, Lander, SBS

*Blood Brothers* series: Episode 1 - 'Broken English', (1992), Ned, Lander, Rachel,
        Perkins, SBS

*Blood Brothers* series: Episode 2 - 'Freedom Ride', (1992), Ned, Lander, Rachel,
        Perkins, SBS

*Bush Nurse*, (1981), ABC

*Change of face*, (1989), SBS

*Coronation Hill - Land of the Apocalypse*, (1992), Bob Plasto, Ruth Berry

*Cutting Edge* series: 'Convicted', (1993), SBS

*Dreamings - the art of Aboriginal Australia*, (1988), Michael Riley

*First contact*, (1982), Bob Connolly, Robin Anderson,

*Focus*: 'A Shame Like Alice' (2 parts), (1983), SBS

*Four Corners* series: 'Aborigines in the Alice', (1972), ABC

*Four Corners* series: 'Comalco vs Weipa studio debate', (1979), ABC

*Four Corners* series: Strangers in their own land', (1979), ABC

*Four corners series*: 'Sick at heart' (1991), ABC

*Four corners series*: 'Six pack politics' (1991), ABC

*From Spirit to Spirit*, (1993), SBS

*George*, (1986), Ron Iddon, SBS

*Kimberley AIDS*, (1992), Ruth Carr, Catherine Adams,

*Long, Long Walkabout*, (1975), Tom Haydon, BBC/ABC

*My Country*, 6.4.94, (1994), Bob Plasto, ABC

*Nature of Australia* series, (1988), David Parer

*On sacred ground*, (1981), Oliver Howes, ABC

*Open File*: 'Fight fire with fire' (August 1985), (1985), ABC

*Open Learning*: Aboriginal Studies, (1993), ABC

*Pintubi*, (1965), ABC

*Proud To Be* (Tjapukai - The World At Our Feet), (1991), Mark Eliot

*Pukamini*, (1960), ABC

*Rolf's Walkabout*, episode 4, (1971), ABC

*Satellite Dreaming*, (1991), Ivo Burum, CAAMA Productions

*Savage indictment*, (1990), Caroline Sherwood, Nicholas Adler

*Sing Lou12.6.94d Play Strong*, (1988), productions, CAAMA

*Six Australians*: Cliff Coulthard, (1985), ABC

*Six Australians*: Freda Glynn, (1985), ABC

*Six Australians*: Maurice Rioli, (1985), ABC

*Six Australians*: Neenya Charles, (1985), ABC

*Six Australians*: Sylvia Blanco, (1985), ABC

*Six Australians*: Trevor Adamson, (1985), ABC

*Sixty Minutes* ('Ernie Dingo'), (12.6.94), Channel 9

*Song for Australia*, (1987), ABC

*Strangers in their own land*, (1979), Granada (UK)

*Tent Embassy*, (1992), David Randy, ABC

*The Changing race*, (1964), Therese Denny, ABC

*The Flying Vet*, (1995), ABC

*The Land that waited*, (1963), Gil Brearly, ABC

*The Last Dream*, (1988), John Pilger, ABC/Central

*The Secret Country*, (1984), John Pilger, Alan Lowery,

*This Fabulous Century*: 'Poor Bugger Me' (1979), details unknown

*TV Ed* (24.3.94), SBS

*Watch your Language*, (15.9.93), ABC

*World we share* series: 'Walpijirri dreaming', (1981), ABC

## Game shows

*Celebrity Wheel of Fortune,* (29.8.94), Grundy, for Channel 7

*Family Feud,* (1994), Grundy, for Channel 7 episodes 249, 951 and 1012 - 1013

*Gladiators,* (1995), Channel 7

*Man O Man,* (1994), Channel 7 12.3.94

*Sale of the Century,* (1.11.93), Channel 9

*Sale of the Century,* (17.2.95, 21.2.95), Channel 9

## Children's Programs

*A Waltz Through The Hills,* (1988), Barron Films/ABC

*Chase through the night,* (1985), Independent Productions

*Clowning Around 2,* (1994), Channel 7 Barron Films

*Clowning Around,* (1992), Channel 7 Barron Films

*Dolphin Cove,* (1990), Channel 10 Paramount Pictures Australia

*Dreamtime Stories* (28.10.94), ABC

*Kideo,* (1992), ABC

*Lift Off 2,* (1994), ACTF Productions,

*Look Who's Talking* (19.3.94), Channel 9

*Manyu Wana,* (1993) Warlpiri Media Association, SBS

*Nargun and the Stars,* (1981), ABC

*Off the dish,* (1986), Channel 10

*Pariki and the Flying Foxes,* (1985), ABC

*Round the Twist,* (1994), ABC

*Swap Shop,* (1988), ABC

*The Henderson Kids,* Crawfords Productions

*The Magic Boomerang,* episode 1 - 'The Discovery', (1964), ABC

*The Magic Boomerang,* episode 2 - 'Christmas Cracker', (1964), ABC

*The Magic Boomerang,* episode 3 - 'The Hypnotist', (1964), ABC

*Top mates,* (1979), ABC

*Totally Wild,* 22.7.94, (1994), Channel 10

*Touch the Sun* series, 'Top Enders', (1988), ABC

*Ultraman,* (1990), 9 Network/SAFC/Tsuburaya,

*Wandjina!,* episodes 1 - 7, (1966), Ken Hannam, ABC

## Magazine/lifestyle programs

*Blackout* (1988 - 1995)

*First in Line,* (1987-1990), SBS

*Hot Chips,* 29.6.94, (1994), ABC

*Midday with Derrin Hynch,* (11.3.94), Channel 9

*Milbindi* (1987), Golden West Network)

*Mulray,* (16.7.94), Channel 7

*Nganampa Anwernekenhe* (1988 - ), CAAMA, Imparja television

*That's Australia,* (1988), ABC

*The Great Outdoors,* 18.3.94, (1994), Channel 7

*This is your life,* with Mike Willesee, (1976)

*TVTV,* (24.3.94), ABC

*Urrpeye* (1987 - ), CAAMA, for Imparja

*Vox Populi,* (1994), SBS

## Mini-series

*A Town Like Alice,* (1981), 7 Network/BBC/Alice Productions

*Cowra Breakout,* ABC

*Essington* (1975), ABC

*Heartland,* (1994), ABC

*Jackeroos,* Crawfords Productions

*Law of the Land* (1993), for Channel 9 Roadshow

*Naked Under Capricorn,* (1989), Resolution films, Channel 9

*Ratbag Hero,* Australis, for Channel 7

*Rose Against the Odds,* (1990), John, Dixon, Onset Productions

*Silent Reach,* (1983), Syme International Productions

*Stark,* (1993), BBC television

*The Timeless Land* (1980), ABC

## Television plays

*Conferenceville*, (1982), ABC
*Kain*, (1967), Lionel, Harris, ABC
*Mail order bride*, (1984), Stephen, Wallace, ABC
*No Sugar*, (80's), ABC
*Pig In A Poke*, episode 5: 'Ray's story', (1977), Brian, Bell, ABC
*The Cake Man*, (1976), Douglas, Sharp, ABC
*Women of the Sun* series, Part 1 - 'Alinta the flame', (1982), ABC SBS
*Women of the Sun* series, Part 2 - 'Maydina the Shadow', (1982), ABC SBS
*Women of the Sun* series, Part 3 - 'Nerida Anderson', (1982), ABC SBS
*Women of the Sun* series, Part 4 - 'Lo-Arna', (1982), ABC SBS

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1  Peter Malone's *In Black and White and Colour* (1987) is the best
      reference work for feature films.  More recent Aboriginal
      appearances can be compiled from David Stratton's *The Avacado
      Plantation* (1990) and Tony Harrison's *The Australian Film and
      Television Companion* (1994), both of which are adequately
      referenced.

2  The catalogues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film festivals are
      also useful in finding details of such material:  for example, the
      AIATSIS catalogue for *Cultural Focus, Cultural Futures* (1992); and
      the AFI catalogue for *My Life as I Live it* (1993).

3  Wendy Borchers at the ABC has been archiving the Aboriginal material
      of that broadcaster in some detail.