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Return to formula: narrative closures in representations of Aboriginal identity in Australian cinema

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This article discusses the impact of narrative closures on Aboriginal identity representations in the Australian film texts of Jeddah, Walkabout and Rabbit-Proof Fence. It argues that filmic representations of Aboriginal identity have been framed within the historical, political and social milieu of the time they were produced, which contributes to the placement of narrative closures in film texts that reinforce the status quo and a return to a predictable equilibrium. It concludes with a discussion on the changes that may or may not occur in the representation of the reality of the lives of the Aboriginal 'Other'.

Keywords: Aboriginal identity, narrative closures, Australian film, Jeddah, Walkabout, Rabbit-Proof Fence.
Introduction

When tackling the semiotic study of film, what is most easy to remember is its reliance on film texts acting as a place for signification. The potential to "make things mean" (Hall, 1982: 64) becomes paramount. Everything in social life has the potential to mean, and film texts, when located within a specific culture, can express and support the meaning of the social organisation of this culture. This is because there is no such thing as meaning which is independent of the ideological and political structures in which it is articulated. Similarly there can be no meaning articulated within film texts which are devoid of the ideological and political structures that support the society in which the film text operates. This is important to consider when evidencing little or a total lack of articulated Aboriginal representation in Australian cinema which signifies a representation on screen expressive of the ideological and political structures of the historical time periods in which the films are produced.

The meaning articulated in filmic narratives follow a basic narrative syntagm, which is a linear chain of events corresponding to the beginning, middle, and end of a story. Metz (1974: 17) observed, "A narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world." Not only do they provide this structure but narratives also reduce unique or unusual events to familiar and regular patterns of expectation (Tolson, 1996: 43). This basic formula in films provides structure, coherence and schemas for everyday life. A positing on the basic formula within a filmic narrative is used in this article to explain the function and operation of narrative structures. It is also used to provide insight into narrative closures which operate within film texts and how this reduces representations of Aboriginal identity in Australian cinema to familiar patterns of expectations.

The film texts chosen for discussion in this article are: Jedda (1955), Walkabout (1971) and Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002). Through these films, an investigation of the way in which visual signs in the cinema are used to represent Aboriginal reality is carried out. The construction of reality within the cinema is understood through films’ recording of it. Film becomes a wider marker of culture when traced as "a recorder of reality - and hence a valuable tool" (Miller, 1992: 192) in the manufacturing of reality and also in our apprehension of reality. Thus Aboriginal reality is juxtaposed with the ways in which it is represented through the four film texts. The fact that these film texts span a period of fifty years helps to explain the changes that may or may not have occurred in visual representation through the passing of time.

A Brief Definition of Narrative Closures

A fundamental insight into the language system by Saussure was the active relationship between signs. Saussure (1974: 128) considered that "normally we do not express ourselves by using single linguistic signs, but groups of signs, organised in complexes which themselves are signs." A sign gained its value from its relation to other similar value signs. Signification would not exist without such a relationship. Hence the identification of elementary constituent segments of a text - its syntagms - underlay the production and interpretation of texts. The use of one syntagmatic relation over another influences its meaning.

Sequential syntagms (relating to a film sequence) in the filmic narrative do not, however, qualify an immediate referential correspondence to reality. Reality cannot be reduced to temporal units and an event, or visual representation of reality, is itself always a construction. This is because film does not reproduce its object; rather it "abstracts from, and mediates, the actual" (Burgin, 1982: 61). Whilst one cannot be mistaken for the other, a film does not simply record an event, but is only one of an infinite number of possible representations.

Rather than reproducing the ‘world’ spontaneously and automatically, as the ideology of realism would have the spectator
believe, the cinematic apparatus always operates selectively, limiting, filtering and transforming the images that are its raw material (Rodowick, 1994: 77).

Film is the twentieth century storyteller and a model through which the world is articulated. The study of film thus necessarily becomes a study of representation (Turner, 1993: 9). Film, no matter how 'realistic', is always a representation rather than a simple recording or reproduction of reality.

Filmic narratives also have a content of their own and a message of their own. In fact, the use of familiar narrative structures in film serves "to naturalize the content of the narrative itself" (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 230). This is often termed as narrative closure, where the end is a return to a predictable equilibrium or a reinforcement of the status quo. In the narrative, lies a message of its own, which is also a construction. This construction serves to naturalise the narrative in its qualifying of reality as a referential correspondence for the audience. Hence representations of Aboriginal identity, which seem unfamiliar or unique to audiences, can be reduced to narrative closures in the text of the film where in the end there is a return to a predictable equilibrium or reinforcement of the status quo. However 'reality' cannot be reduced objectively to discrete temporal units. Narrative is such an automatic choice for representing events that it seems unproblematic and 'natural'.

Formulaic Representations of Aboriginal Identity

The use of narrative closure in the films which represent Aboriginal characters follows the premise that the narratives end in a return to a predictable equilibrium. The three films chosen to be discussed here are seen through such a narrative closure premise and also located within the realm of existing scholarship in Australian cinema. The earliest work selected is that of Charles Chauvel's *Jedda*. Stuart Cunningham's extensive work on the cinema of Charles Chauvel (1991) is central to the analysis in this article, in particular his examination of the correlation between ethnographic and social typage used by Chauvel in his presentation of *Jedda*, and Chauvel's close examination of the contemporary interrelations between the ethnographic study of and policy pertaining to Aboriginal culture at the time. The analysis of the next film, Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout*, is located within Neil Feineman's study of Roeg (1978), and Neil Sinyard's (1991) and John Izod's (1980, 1992) research into Roeg's films, all of which help to historicise *Walkabout*. The third and most recent film, Philip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, is the last to be analysed. The reading of this film is centred on the Collins and Davis study of Australian cinema after Mabo (2004).

_Jedda_ came as Charles Chauvel's final attempt at portraying European-Aboriginal 'cultural' relations. No other Australian filmmaker of his generation demonstrated such commitment to the ideal of films made in Australia. Chauvel's two silent and seven sound features were produced over a period of almost thirty years, for most of which he collaborated with his wife Elsa; raising finance, scripting, directing, casting, and producing their own films. The Cinesound years of the 1930's produced films in a somewhat formulaic pattern with conventional depictions of Australian discourses of the time. In contrast to this, Chauvel developed more integrated and complex, if somewhat tragic, feature productions clustered around related discourses of pioneering, cultural tensions and family life. It is this theme of cultural tensions relating to bush life and consequent inferences about class, gender, and racial roles, which through its repetition and transformation over the course of his career found a striking narrative illustration in _Jedda_. In it, both the central Aboriginal characters of Jedda and Marbuk are eliminated at the end of the film.

The correlation between pessimistic representations of the Aboriginal race in _Jedda_ and the reality of the policy-making at the time is unmistakable. The policy of assimilation and the policy-oriented anthropological studies based on assimilation informed Chauvel in the making of _Jedda_. The policy at the time corresponds to a social typing of Aboriginal people, who were believed to be an inferior race and consequently either better off being assimilated
completely or destroyed. The beliefs, attitudes, and values which underpinned such a policy were based solely on Social Darwinism and a belief in white racial superiority and keeping Australia ‘racially pure’. Assimilation was seen in the language of Social Darwinism, as a natural process of ‘survival of the fittest’. According to this, the future of Aboriginal people was inevitably doomed; what was needed from the governments and missionaries was to ‘smooth the dying pillow’. There existed the belief that Aboriginal people were morally and biologically inferior to whites (McConnochie et al., 1988:82). The policy of assimilation stated that Aboriginal people:

shall attain the same manner of living as other Australians, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and being influenced by the same [later amended to similar] beliefs, hopes and loyalties.

(Lippmann 1981:18)

The responsible minister at the time informed the House of Representatives that, “Assimilation means, in practical terms, that, in the course of time, it is expected that all persons of aboriginal (sic) blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do” (Hasluck quoted in Stone, 1974: 193). The assimilationist debates were thus guided in a framework of the parameters of ‘blood’ and ‘culture’ (Jennings, 1993).

_Jedda’s_ narrative, which upholds the discourse of assimilation, is highlighted by its central characters - Sarah and Doug McMann, Jedda and Marbuk. Grieved by the death of her own child, Sarah McMann adopts an Aboriginal girl (Jedda) from her husband’s cattle station. She becomes increasingly anxious that Jedda never return to the ‘freedom of her tribal life’ which is graphically denoted in numerous scenes: where Sarah tries to teach Jedda the alphabet by showing pictures of animals in a book, when she rolls out animal tracks Jedda has traced out in dough, when she forces a crying Jedda to put on shoes, and when she instructs Jedda to the strains of ‘Little Baby Jesus’. These metonymic images are constructed in terms of repression and control and the paternalism inherent in the assimilationist viewpoint. Sarah’s assimilationist position is articulated through her language, character and performance but hystericalised through her ‘moral purity’ and assumption in carrying the ‘white man’s burden’ to ‘civilise’ the so-called ‘lower races’. Doug’s cultural integrity is conceded as a self interested response to the need for cheap and reliable labour on his pastoral farm. The logic and weakness of both positions are carried forward across the film.

Marbuk on the other hand is represented as being the ‘paramour’ who seduces Jedda, and it is precisely because of this ‘moral weakness’ that he must be eliminated. The representation of Marbuk and Jedda is constructed by Chauvel to signify the end of their race. They are not allowed to live, because as signifiers in the film, they are made to represent the story of a race which is ultimately doomed to extinction. Marbuk is eliminated and

...so inexorably will his ‘race’ die out because of the asserted inherent Darwinian weakness of Aborigines, morally and genetically...Marbuk and his paramour, the poor seduced Jedda, must die. It is precisely because of Marbuk’s lust that Chauvel destroys him. He is the lust of a ‘real primitive’. He is an outlaw. He refuses to submit to ‘civilisation’. (Langton, 1993: 48-49)

The underlying messages appeared to be that Aboriginal cultural beliefs and loyalties did not matter and that Aboriginal people were to accept the prevailing Eurocentric views without question. The belief in the hopelessness of the ‘Aboriginal situation’, and the representation of it in _Jedda_, points to these socio-historical patterns of 1950s Australia which in the end shaped Chauvel’s ideologies. _Jedda_ was read to be a “dramatised debate about the ethics and feasibility of assimilation” (Jennings, 1993: 33).

Other films of the time confirmed the stereotype of Aboriginal people as being ‘savage’ or ‘inferior’. _Bitter Springs_ (1950), directed by Ralph Smart presents the two lifestyles of the European
Australian bushmen and Aboriginal bushmen to be incompatible and conflicting. Aboriginal land must inevitably be ‘civilised’ and this conquest of the land naturalised colonisation in Australian history and social myth-making systems. Chauvel’s Jedda began when this discourse about Aboriginal culture becoming ‘civilised’ had taken firm root in the history and psyche of the time.

Similarly, in Nicolas Roeg’s Walkabout, the Aboriginal boy commits suicide at the end of the film, once again emphasising a ‘dying culture’ and the need to represent it as such. The Aboriginal boy is allowed to befriend the two white characters in the film. However, the resolution of the filmic narrative is not ambiguous. The Aboriginal boy is portrayed as being too ‘fragile’ to survive the destructive alienation of the ‘outside’ white world. Implicitly, Walkabout is a film about the quality of modern western life, its comforts as well as its pressures, its connotations of alienation and breakdown, potential energy and overpowering devitalisation.

The images of Aboriginal culture in the film are represented as being associated with the stark landscape, bristling with danger and vitality. It is an alien landscape which audiences find analogous to the Aboriginal way of life, connoted as being uncomplicated and natural and in essence ‘primitive’. Such a way of life was also assumed to be static and unchanging and thus inadaptable to the reality of the ‘civilised’ white world. To an urban audience the skill of the Aboriginal boy and his knowledge of the land and desert environment only reinforce the distance of his ‘way of life’ from that of ‘civilisation’. The relentless progress of this civilisation and the eventual death of the Aboriginal boy emphasise primitivism, affinity with nature and images of the ‘noble savage’ belonging to a dying culture. Such a despairing view of Aboriginal culture, whether intentional or unintentional by Roeg, points to the operation of inherent racist attitudes in the portrayal of Aboriginal culture at the time. It also relates to instances of the colonial and neo-colonial attitudes that not only oppress Aboriginal identity but also represent it. The treatment of landscape and Aboriginal people perhaps lead to this:

...intensely poetic evocation of the severities of the Australian desert and its unusually sympathetic view of its black protagonist, [that] is simply too strange, too removed from the conventionally accepted images of Australia and its people. (McFarlane and Mayer, 1992: 182)

Rather than a fully developed character, the Aboriginal boy exists only in contrast to the girl. Roeg uses the character of the girl as the reference point, rather than the Aboriginal boy. The Aboriginal boy is never allowed to become the film’s main protagonist. Roeg never fully explains him, and by treating him from the girl’s ‘eyes’ as a person from a different culture, Roeg prevents an understanding of and true identification with the Aboriginal boy and perhaps the Aboriginal way of life. The girl’s childish behaviour also demonstrates racist dimensions, especially when they come across the abandoned house. She commands the Aboriginal boy to get her some “guapa” (water). Despite her haughty tones, the Aboriginal boy smiles because it is the first time that the girl has spoken to him in his language. He responds for the first time in English and proudly says “water”. Rather than acknowledging the use of his English and thanking him for saving her and her brother and leading them to safety, she coldly turns away and dismisses him as if he were an ignorant, unskilled, and inconsequential servant. The pervasiveness of colonial attitudes is apparent in her demeanour. She is young, and yet displays an arrogant attitude towards Aboriginal culture, a culture she has never been exposed to. The effectiveness of her socialisation is sharply connoted. The Aboriginal boy’s actions, such as his dance and ultimate death, are ‘pure’, uncomplicated, and natural and allow audiences to identify with him only to the extent where viewers are left wondering what the end would have been had the girl not been so effectively socialised. His adaptability is also inextricably linked to his youth; beyond his ability to adjust, he has little to offer adult audiences.
Rather than end the film with the Aboriginal boy's response, Roeg ends it with the girl's. The Aboriginal boy has the potential to become the film's hero, but remains relatively undeveloped. To an urban audience his skill, knowledge, and compatibility with the environment are impressive. The audience is allowed to view the brutal and wasteful devastation of the white hunter through the Aboriginal boy's eyes, when he watches the buffalo shooting. However viewers are also left to conclude that the Aboriginal way of life is 'doomed' because of the relentless progress of 'civilisation' and the heartbreaking end of the boy's death. Everywhere the Aboriginal boy looks, he is exposed to death and destruction. Roeg even foreshadows his death by panning over an enormous graveyard of buffalo bones whitened by the sun, with the Aboriginal boy lying in it, painted as a white skeleton, and seeming to merge into the graveyard. Nonetheless, Roeg undercuts viewer identification with the Aboriginal boy by providing no obvious explanation for his ultimate death. Hence the Aboriginal boy is no more than the mental image of a connoted 'noble savage' who is doomed to destruction.

Despite this reading, it is also essential to point out that Walkabout is seen as being a 'progressive' film, relative to the time of its production. It is essentially a photographer's film. "It is really a cinema-poem about Australia, its peoples, terrain, traditions and myths" (Malone, 1988: 31). It is an exploration in images of the colour and music of the Australian terrain. International audiences more readily perceived the poetic texture and meaning of the film. Local audiences took everything in the film very literally and expressed disappointment about the factual inaccuracies and lack of realism in the film. The 'colour and music' of Roeg's cinematic poem met with only moderate success at home. Nonetheless, Roeg undercuts viewer identification with the Aboriginal boy by providing no obvious explanation for his ultimate death. Hence the Aboriginal boy is no more than the mental image of a connoted 'noble savage' who is doomed to destruction.

Walkabout resembled the types of films that emerged in the second half of the 1970s, the 'quality film' (O'Regan, 2000). The connection between Walkabout and the 'quality film' is described as one that enabled the film to "set the whole 1970s revival going several years before it in fact took off" (McFarlane, 1987: 74). Walkabout was thus ahead of its time.

However the consistent refusal of white culture in both Jedda and Walkabout to accommodate Aboriginal culture, or coexist with it, refers directly to a large portion of Australian identity representations, which returned to a familiar end; the triumph of colonial and neo-colonial attitudes. A return to the 'familiar schemas' or 'reinforcing the status quo' encapsulated in these films emphasise the historical time frames within which these two films were produced. This time-frame of the 1950s and 1970s formed a similar pattern of expectation from audiences who were not interested in witnessing the triumph of an Aboriginal culture over a non-Aboriginal one. The underlying emphasis was a return to a predictable equilibrium of the destruction of the Aboriginal race, as with Jedda, or a representation of the inherent weakness of the Aboriginal race, as in Walkabout.

Even a more contemporary response to a changed socio-historical situation, such as that presented by Noyce in Rabbit-Proof Fence, cannot discharge the propensity for formulaic narrative closure, despite it being presented in a different and more sympathetic manner in the film. At the end of the film, the audience is made to comprehend the full meaning of the recapture of Molly and the removal of Molly's own daughter from her. This documentary like sequence focuses on the real life subjects of the Stolen Generations discourse and the effects of child separation. The real life Molly, in the space of a few seconds, explains how she was forced to repeat the walk from the Moore River Settlement to Jigalong. She says:

We went straightaway and hid in the desert. I got married. I had two baby girls. Then they took me and my two girls back to that place - Moore River. And I
walked all the way... back to Jigalong again, carrying Annabelle, the little one. When she was three, that Mr. Neville took her away. I’ve never seen her again. (transcribed from film)

Audiences are able to comprehend the traumatic magnitude of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* through the portrayal of this aspect of Molly’s life, her second journey and the removal of her younger daughter with whom she was never reunited. The real life Molly and Daisy are two ‘found’ members of the Stolen Generations. The documentary like sequence and Molly’s narration recover stolen histories and highlight the real life subjects of the film.

When Molly Kelly passed away in her sleep at Jigalong in January 2004, the Age newspaper reported her death as that of “the heroine of the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*”. The report validates the role of the film in bringing to public attention the epic journey she undertook. The report also draws attention to what was not ‘recoverable’, the unspeakable aspects of the story. Despite Molly’s strengths, “endurance, cleverness and courage”, and despite the film’s success nationally and internationally, making Molly a national heroine, “She died with one regret, that she was never reunited with the daughter taken from her 60 years ago” (Squires, 2004). In light of this report on Molly’s death and her regret at never being reunited with her daughter, Noyce’s aim of wanting to use the film to recover ‘stolen histories’ can be questioned. Thousands of untold stories can never be fully recovered for the public record. The film cannot be used to conjure lost or ‘unclaimed experience’ (Caruth, 1991: 182). Hence, while the film acknowledges the complex dynamics of assimilation, it also successfully compartmentalises the intergenerational effects of separation as discrete.

Molly and Daisy’s presence onscreen asserts the ‘ongoingness’ of their lives, and the presence of differing temporal, spatial and cultural meanings, but these are shown to be separate from Noyce’s preceding ‘Hollywood rendering’ of the story. The final frames provide the audience with a complex historical narrative in contrast to its feel-good ending. The documentary-style shots of Molly and Daisy may appeal to authenticity, but their treatment as an end to the film moves the narrative beyond the enclosures of the film, marking it as detached from the rest of the filmic narrative itself. Its reference to ongoing stories and trauma is not made the focus of the film, making it only indirectly accessible to audiences. The epilogue reinforces the film’s claims to authenticity and historical truth, and addresses the audience as witnesses, but cannot claim to speak for all ‘stolen histories’.

Despite the emphasis on the ‘local’ Australian narrative of the film, Noyce approached it as a universal story, emphasising the universal elements of tragedy and heroism, in turn ensuring the film a broad, widespread appeal with empathy as its key premise. Noyce considered his initial task as director to first achieve a form of empathy, to put himself into the ‘shoes’ of the girls. It was also not unreasonable to imagine that most of the audience at whom the film was targeted, a predominantly mainstream and international audience, would not have had the experience of being forcibly removed from their parents, or having their children removed from them. To address this, Noyce asked the audience to take an imaginative leap and subjectively immerse themselves in the film’s trajectory, illustrated by a controversial poster for the film reading, “What if the government kidnapped your daughter?” He bypassed several critiques of universalism, such as the distancing of the audience from the emotion of the story, by using the language of empathy. Noyce chose to impose a distinction between the discourse of assimilation and the discourse of empathy within the film, but not in a conventional dialogical fashion. There is no one in the film who challenges Neville directly. This is akin to the historical situation at the time, where the chief protectors were the law.

The crucial point where the regime of assimilation and empathy are brought into confrontation is when Molly is inspected by Neville in front of the assembled children at Moore River Settlement. During her walk up to him, the viewer is placed in Molly’s body and looks
empathically though her eyes. Molly's heavy breathing is dubbed over in the soundtrack in a way that is reminiscent of horror movies. The horror seems to be markedly apt. Noyce cinematically invites the audience to experience assimilation through the discourse of empathy evident in the scene. In this moment Noyce neatly enfolds the predicament of understanding assimilation. We must ask: Who am I in this drama? The child, for we have all have been children? Neville? The kind-faced sisters? All productive questions, but entirely premised on the ability to inhabit multiple subject positions - a premise the film does not question and which we as watchers are also invited to ignore. We watch in disgust as Neville carefully scrutinises Molly's body to judge its level of pigmentation, although we hardly pause when seconds earlier we casually occupy this same body. Our 'being' Molly is, in my view, sanctioned by the empathetic imperative of Hollywood film. (D'aeth, 2002)

Through this 'empathetic imperative' the audience is asked to experience the child's view, more than the Aboriginal view. It falls to Molly, as the child, to act as the vehicle of cross-cultural translation. That these children are now adults is not rendered as the pivotal discourse by Noyce, who speaks through the film of the lost child and the severance of familial and cultural ties. The multiple subject positions that the audience are asked to inhabit forms the visual strategy of the film, its sole purpose being to evoke empathy and identification with the subject matter.

The audience is asked to be Molly and not only identify with her story but also look through her eyes. Many scenes are shot as if the camera were Molly's eyes and the audience is inside her experience. The use of this effect is seen most vividly during the abduction scene of the three girls from their mothers. It is shot with a hand-held camera positioned at the height of the child, immediately allowing the audience to identify with the girls as the car approaches, its wheels running over the fence, significant in its connotation of breaking the boundary between cultures. The abduction scene is experienced as a 'truth' which involves an intense affectivity from the viewer. Noyce explains the use of this technique as his intention to force empathetic ends through contrasting perspectives; that he wanted to avoid "formal camera moves...[in that they would] feel [too] much like the hand of...Neville, imposed upon the story" (Cordaiy, 2002: 129). However in claiming political and historical truth, this scene represents a specific traumatic event as a 'typical' representation.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence's* empathetic appeal to local and global audiences stamps the film as a Hollywood commodity, safely packaging difference as a collectivised universal experience to ensure the ultimate goal of commercial success. The reliance of the film on universal audience engagement based upon empathy undermines the recognition of the distinctive Aboriginal experiences that the story simultaneously claims, despite the fact that the Hollywood forum acted as a de facto forum for final justice and brought the issues surrounding Australia's Stolen Generations to an international arena. This uncannily corresponds with the publicity that surrounded Charles Chauvel's *Jedda*, which at the time it was made was heralded as "a film only Australia could give the world" (Beckett, 2000: 94).

The ending of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* characterises a return to the schema of 'familiar' events. The narrative structure of the film sets it through classic Hollywood Western genres - with capture, escape, chase, and recapture. The first half involves the three girls being taken to Moore River Settlement and the second half shows their escape and chase to recapture them. The romanticised melodrama the story is infused with prompts a sympathetic response from audiences. Noyce safely packages difference as a collectivised universal experience to ensure not only the commercial success of the film, but also active audience identification with the protagonists. The reliance of the film on audience engagement ensures that reductions of 'truth' in the storytelling are experienced as intensely affective, making the process of identification final and complete. The propensity of the
film text to exhibit such a narrative closure based on closed identifications is evident.

However, the film is an inducement to all Australians to publicly remember the Stolen Generations and ‘bring them home’. It succeeds in recovering a trace of cinematic history for contemporary audiences. Films such as *Jedda* and *Walkabout* formed connotations of Aboriginal people as tragically failing to integrate into modern life; *Rabbit-Proof Fence* asked audiences to dissociate from such popular colonial images. It’s national and international commercial success, availability with ease in mainstream video stores, and as an educational medium through its own study kit is testament to this role for contemporary audiences. The study kit provides a platform, arguably the most comprehensive, for audiences to engage with the subject matter of the filmic narrative unlike that seen before in films with Aboriginal characters. The ‘academic nature’ of such an additional feature is highlighted in its introduction where is stated:

The themes and activities developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from the middle to senior years studying these subjects: Studies of Society and Environment, Australian History, Cultural Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, English, Personal Development, Religious Studies and Media Studies. In addition to the specific focus on the issue of the Stolen Generations, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* explores themes such as Aboriginal spirituality, relationships with the land, family bonds, courage, determination and faith.

It offers curriculum links, references and historical contexts for the film and provides readers with extensive questions to think about before and after watching the film. The study kit offers students ways of reading the text, and piques their interest in its various themes. Nonetheless the study kit’s ultimate uniqueness and achievements do not mask the fact that the film does not re-tell Aboriginal history and experience in a form that matches its radical content or is free of narrative closures.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed the propensity of certain film texts in Australia to evoke the operation of narrative closures. It juxtaposes film narrative’s tendency to return to a predictable end with the historical, political and social situation at the time of the films’ production. The historical milieu of *Jedda* presupposed it to lie within the legacy of the Assimilation policy entrenched in 1950s Australia. Using the language of Social Darwinism, the policy rested on the belief that Aboriginal people belonged to a dying race and it was in the ‘best interests’ of the Aboriginal race to be assimilated completely into the ‘wider’ society. Interpretations of this assimilationist viewpoint tended to view the disappearance of the Aboriginal race as the eventual outcome of the policy. The assimilationist approach, to have Aboriginal culture diluted into a larger culture, had devastating effects. Assimilation portrayed ‘Aboriginality’ as a thing of the past based not only on ‘race’, but on a notion of culture and shared values. Such an understanding of normative behaviour and methods of cultural indoctrination provided new justifications for the definitions of a ‘superior’ non-Aboriginal culture. This fact was prominent throughout the narrative of *Jedda*, where Doug and Sarah McMann expounded the belief in the shift from biology to lifestyle, from skin colour based on race to cultural proselytism. The Assimilation policy offered Aboriginal people, as do representations throughout *Jedda*, a chance to ‘fit in’ and stop being culturally distinctive. When Jedda is tempted by her ‘primitive’ Aboriginal side through Marbuk, they are both destroyed. Aboriginal people were cast as something ‘Other’ and the only way in which non-Aboriginal Australians would accept Aboriginal people as having a place in the nation was to share in their interests and beliefs and lifestyle.

More notably, Aboriginal characters represented the complementary racial ‘Other’ to Australia’s filmic representations of
symbolically charged landscapes and archetypal characters - the Bushman and Digger, the underdog Battler and his ideal, masculine, community of mates. Aboriginal people were routinely figured as 'vanishing' creatures of nature, as clearly displayed in Walkabout, and other films of the Australian New Wave Cinema of the 1970s and 1980s such as The Last Wave (1977) and The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978). In this national imaginary, Aboriginal people were eternally and spiritually foreclosed from the chalk circle of modernity, of white settler society and culture (Turner, 1993: 26). It assumed a monolithic and homogeneous image of Australia with the possibility of enforcing social change with the aim of the ultimate destruction of a whole race within this population.

Rabbit-Proof Fence achieves in emphasising the need to avoid the primitivism that was at work in the making of Walkabout, where the Aboriginal boy takes his own life in despair, or Jedda, where both Aboriginal characters meet a destructive end. Seen purely as a film of Aboriginal survival and resistance, Rabbit-Proof Fence refutes visual representations and two centuries of historical representations of Aboriginal people as 'doomed and dying' who have no place in modernity. It is hoped that through the further development of such films, and recent productions like Rolf De Heer's Ten Canoes (2006), that narrative closures in film texts can finally be overturned.

Ultimately narratives of any type, not restricted to filmic narratives alone, fix identities in relation to the way they are presented. Filmic narratives fix identities according to the way they are represented on screen. However this should not be seen as their sole function. Filmic narratives should be seen as crucial transmitters for carrying the message from camera to the eye and articulating theory within practice. The articulation of such a theory within practice can perhaps replenish phenomenological lacunae in socially constructed narratives and as such become fundamental in the process of concretisation of an idea. This idea can then be defined as what the viewers perceive to be the reality of the lives of the Aboriginal 'Other', which has not been tainted by filmic narrative

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