FILM, REPRESENTATION AND THE EXCLUSION OF ABORIGINAL IDENTITY: EXAMPLES FROM AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the latter half of the past century cinema has played a significant role in the shaping of the core narratives of Australia. Films express and implicitly shape national images and symbolic representations of cultural fictions in which ideas about Indigenous identity have been embedded. In this paper, exclusionary practices in Australian narratives are analysed through examples of films representing Aboriginal identity. Through these filmic narratives the articulation, interrogation, and contestation of views about filmic representations of Aboriginal identity in Australia is illuminated. The various themes in the filmic narratives are examined in order to compare and contrast the ways in which the films display the operation of narrative closure and dualisms within the film texts.

1   INTRODUCTION

Pictures, whether cinematographic or photographic, always use the media as a vehicle for constructing reality. The construction of reality within the cinema is understood through films' recording of it. Film becomes a wider marker of culture when it is 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. "Film and video are cultural artefacts" (Bryson, 2000: 99) and as such allow for a visual representation quite unlike "the deceptive world of words" (Collier, 2002: 59). Representation is thus made 'real' to an audience through the medium of film.

Film assembles images together to disseminate compelling narratives to a vast audience at the same time. Hence audiences become involved in the process of representation. They become more than mere passive receptacles of the images that are presented to them. This is achieved through film's ability to utilise material and institutional practices to make representation more 'real'. The scope and representation of Aboriginal people in Australian cinema today, depends a great deal on image-makers carrying messages across to Australian audiences. Unfortunately most filmic representations of Aboriginal identity create Aboriginal characters who are 'figures of the imagination' and perceived as being distortions of actual reality (Langton, 1993). Aboriginal people are regarded as being safe characters related through stories told by 'former colonists'. These representations are not of an actual world of people but only images that non-Aboriginal Australians find acceptable.

Aboriginal identity is constructed at various levels in Australian society, imposing particular political and social discursive regimes on Aboriginal people around a series of false dichotomies and forced choices (Hodge and Mishra, 1992). This allows for an intellectual, cultural, and material construction of white colonial hegemony on Aboriginal

culture and identity. It allows and continues to allow Aboriginal people to be structurally marginalized from Australian histories and presents the strongest argument for Aboriginal exclusion from Australian narratives, including filmic narratives. Aboriginal exclusion extends a colonial 'gaze' on Aboriginal issues and ultimately Aboriginal representation in cultural productions, such as film, where Aboriginal people are shown as nothing else but victims, alcoholics, fringe, and slum dwellers (Kearner, 1993: 57).

2   DISCUSSION

2.1   NARRATIVE CLOSURES AND ABORIGINAL EXCLUSION

Insofar as film narratives are formulaic, they "reduce the unique or the unusual to familiar and regular patterns of expectation" (Tolson, 1996: 43). They provide structure and coherence and are similar to schemas for familiar 'events' in everyday life. However 'reality' cannot be reduced objectively to discrete temporal units. The narrative form itself has a content and message of its own. Narrative is such an automatic choice for representing events that it seems unproblematic and 'natural'. The use of a familiar narrative structure serves "to naturalize the content of the narrative itself" (Hodge and Kress, 1988: 230). The use of structural closure in films which represent Indigenous characters follows the premise that the narratives end in a return to a predictable equilibrium. In Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955), both the central characters of Jedda and Marbuk are eliminated. Marbuk is represented as being the "paramour" who seduces Jedda, and it is precisely because of this 'moral weakness' of his race that he must be eliminated. They are not allowed to live, because they are made to represent the story of a race which is ultimately doomed to extinction.

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 at the time corresponds to such 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'. 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.

Similarly, in Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971), the Aboriginal boy commits suicide, 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, but is portrayed as being too 'fragile' to survive the destructive alienation of the 'outside' white world.

The images of Aboriginal culture in *Walkabout* are represented through 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 unadaptable 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 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 emphasize 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 Indigenous culture over a non-Indigenous one.

The historical milieu of *Jedda* presupposed it to lie within the legacy of the Assimilation policy entrenched in 1950s Australia. The destructiveness of the policy lay in the practice of systematically defining Aboriginal people as distinct and inferior. 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 also 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-Indigenous 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 (white) interests, 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* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. 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.

Even a more contemporary response to a changed socio-historical situation, such as that presented by Philip Noyce in *Rabbit Proof Fence*, cannot ultimately discharge the formulaic narrative. Only at the documentary style conclusion of the film was the audience was 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 at the end of the film focuses on the real life subjects of the Stolen Generations and the effects of child separation. The 'real life' shots of Molly and Daisy appeal to authenticity, but they are detached from the rest of the filmic narrative itself. Noyce's efforts compartmentalise the intergenerational effects of the trauma of separation.

The narrative structure of the film also sets it as a classic Hollywood western genre - with capture, escape, chase, and recapture. 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 an 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.

2.2   THE OPERATION OF DUALISMS IN ABORIGINAL EXCLUSION

A consistent reinforcement of Aboriginal racial stereotyping is also marked cinematically through the existence of binary oppositions, or dualisms, within the filmic narrative.

Interpretation of myths occurring in any text requires the individual tales to form a 'cycle of myths'. A tale is understood by considering its position in the whole cycle and the differences between that tale and others in the sequence. Dualism employed in cultural practices helps to create order out of the intricacies of everyday experience. The apparent universal human tendency to divide is seen in terms such as 'good and bad', 'black and white', 'us and them' and 'self and the Other'. The 'self' is often defined in relation or contrast to the 'Other'. Such binary oppositions form the underlying systems of classification within cultures and constitute fundamental organising principles.

The existence of pairs in binary opposition creates contrasts which form the skeletal structures on which all narratives can be animated. More importantly, in every binary pair one term is favoured and the other disfavoured, as in Levi-Straussian terms: cooked is better than raw, good is better than evil, light is better than dark, and so on. The pairings of the term is rarely symmetrical, rather it is hierarchical and the two terms are accorded differing values.

Concrete details from the narrative can be examined in the context of the larger filmic structure seen as an overall network of basic dyadic pairs which have symbolic, thematic, and archetypal resonance. Following the dualistic method of analysis, that is analysing Australian filmic narratives as founded upon underlying paired opposites or dyads, contrasts between various representations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity are seen.

The most glaring operation of this filmic dyad is seen in *Jedda* where Chauvel separates the interior from the exterior landscape, with the homestead not centred in any single shot. This separation of 'civilisation' and 'urban' from the 'primitive' landscape formed a part of Chauvel's ideology. With his aversion to the city, he exemplified that part of the old 'bush' versus 'city' ideology. He believed that he could shoot interiors anywhere, but the exteriors had to be sought, had to be 'authentic' pieces of land populated by 'authentic' characters. He searched extensively to find exteriors approaching the clarity of his ideological vision, just as he searched to locate an Aboriginal person comparable to his picture of the 'noble savage', one uncontaminated by contact with civilisation. Marbuk is hence a 'natural man' and the epitome of the 'noble savage' who is responsible for awakening Jedda's 'primitive' instincts.

The distinctive imagery of the 'primitive' is also equated with the outback in the narrative of *Walkabout*. In particular these 'primitive' images of Indigenous identity in an unknown opposition to non-Indigenous 'culture' are glaringly present. In it the seemingly limitless, indifferent, and menacing 'nature' of the outback is juxtaposed with the innocence and naïveté of the 'civilised' children.

Such a narrative is not conspicuously present in the lost child narrative of *Rabbit Proof Fence*, but the film still connotes the outback as something to be conquered and feared. The three girls remain important not only in representing an actual history of the Stolen Generations, but also the ideological binary of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations that white Australia is still trying to navigate. *Rabbit Proof Fence*, and its counterparts *One Night the Moon* and *Beneath Clouds* show that this history is fairly recently being allowed a filmic space.

The threat to innocence is a basic device used by melodrama to generate audience involvement. The 'lost child' narratives are imbibed with a particular sense of loss generated by their dramatisation of the possibility of returning home. This loss played out through Aboriginal characters in *Rabbit Proof Fence* redefines the meaning of 'land' and 'home'. The image of a hostile, indifferent and unknown landscape as that of *Walkabout* is actively inverted to allow for the idea that Aboriginal people belong to the land, have customary obligations to the land, and are physically and emotionally affected when they are taken away from it (Collins and Davis, 2004: 141).

The so-called 'lost' girls represent the ideological opposition to a colonial history which a recent settler country like Australia is coming to grips with. In *Rabbit Proof Fence*, as with *Jedda* and *Walkabout*, the role of the outback and natural environment has been used as an index of a menacing wilderness, a site of conflict and a theatre in flux. This stands in opposition to the 'urban' or non-contested nationality which is connoted as an index of normality or 'civilisation'. However, in avoiding the primitivism existent in *Walkabout*, *Rabbit Proof Fence* does counter the image of Aboriginal people as being the 'lost children' and instead tells the story of survival and resistance.

The conflict of the 'self' versus the 'Other' forms a similar oppositional structure to 'primitive' and 'civilised'. The contrast of a non-Indigenous 'self' is placed in direct opposition to an Indigenous 'Other', substantiated by the belief in the 'primitive' affinity with nature versus the 'civilised' urban way of life. In *Jedda* Chauvel constructs this apparent dyad with Jedda's own building frustration over what she believes to be the Aboriginal 'Other' of her identity. The influence of Marbuk on Jedda further endorses the representation of the 'primitive Other' who ultimately leads to Jedda's own destruction, due to the fact that she could not control her 'primitive' self and its urges. Similarly, in *Walkabout* the Aboriginal boy as the 'primitive Other' represents the primal desires and uncertainty associated with the outback. The sensitivity and spirituality of the Aboriginal boy and his relationship to the land are viewed through images of that very same land being a hostile and alien 'Other'. As the doomed 'noble savage' he is shown as being too fragile to survive the confrontation with the rationalist Western attitudes.

The two terms of the 'self' versus the 'Other' cannot be understood without the existence and operation of each. The signified of the 'Other' is always indicated as being secondary to the primary 'self', reducing Aboriginal characters and their representations to the expectations of this binarism. Viewers of *Walkabout* are 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 this ultimate death. *Walkabout* did not deviate from the stereotypical portrait of the Aboriginal 'bush boy' embellished with supposed empirical observations about Aboriginal people, with its emphasis on their 'primitivism' and affinity with nature, observations of the 'noble savage', and those of a dying culture.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Filmic representations of Aboriginal identity are influenced by socio-cultural variables, historical factors, and dominant discourses. Australian films, located within the specific culture of 'mainstream' Australia, express and support the evident social organisation through its dominant discourses. These dominant discourses are linked with myth and ideology. Myths function as ideological meanings which legitimate the status quo and serve the interests of those in power (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996: 97). This 'mystification' of assumptions about Aboriginal identity led to a white cultural ideology through the establishment and propagation of a dominant white discourse in Australia from the time of colonisation.

Such a dominant discourse had no place for Aboriginal identity representations which did not confirm the 'end of the race' or the perceived moral, racial, and spiritual inferiority ascribed to Aboriginal culture. Contrasts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity were made apparent through the films that operated within such a dominant discourse. Thus cultural hegemony is evidenced in Australian cinema through an explication of the

connection of each film to the policies and dominant discourses of each era and the myth-making systems.

While it is true that overt racist representations of a homogenised, assimilated, and dying Aboriginal culture no longer exist, there still operates within filmic texts, the stereotyping of Aboriginal identity. For Australian audiences, Australian film texts have provided and continue to provide vicarious experiences of an imaginary and lived reality of the life of the 'Other'. From such a vicarious experience, attitudes and values about the Indigenous 'Other' are extracted.

National Australian identity is a concept which encompasses dominant ideologies, mythology, and national types. This identity can be thrown open to interrogation and inspection through a study of the film texts it produces. Filmic narratives serve the interests of one dominant group in Australian society and inevitably include some and exclude others. This is mainly because film is a cultural production viewed within the constraints, imagination, and signification of the society in which it operates. The representations made within it are also bound within these constraints, imagination, and significations. There can be no absolute representations because we live in a dynamic, ever-changing society. It is unfortunate that Aboriginal people, as part of this dynamism have not been given the chance to display such manifest changes within their own identity representations.

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The Last Wave. Director: Peter Weir, Producer: Hal McElroy and Jim McElroy, Screenplay: Peter Weir, Tony Morphett, Petru Popescu, 1977.

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith. Director, Producer and Screenplay: Fred Schepisi, Based on the novel by Thomas Keneally, 1978.

Rabbit Proof Fence. Director and Producer: Philip Noyce, Screenplay: Christine Olsen, Based on the book by Doris Pilkington, 2002.

One Night the Moon. Director: Rachel Perkins, Producers: Kevin Lucas, Aanya Whitehead and Paul Humfress , Screenplay: John Romeril and Rachel Perkins, 2001.

Beneath Clouds. Director: Ivan Sen, Producer: Teresa-Jayne Hanlon, Screenplay: Ivan Sen, 2002.