

# Camera obscura: representations of indigenous identity within Australian cinema

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**Publication Date:**

2006

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/15696>

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**CAMERA OBSCURA:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY  
WITHIN AUSTRALIAN CINEMA**

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A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
School of Sociology and Anthropology  
The University of New South Wales  
March 2006

## Abstract

Karen Jennings (1993) and Peter Krausz (2003) in their works, written ten years apart, note the *changing ways* in which the academic world and the media have dealt with representations of Indigenous identity. It was hoped that the latter work would have been discussing the way in which things have *already changed*. The fact that it does not, initiates the questions addressed in this thesis: whether Australian cinema explores Indigenous issues in sufficient depth and with cultural resonance. Can a study of cinematic representations lead to a better understanding of Aboriginal identity? In representing Aboriginality on screen does the cinema present a representational complex for Indigenous Australia, which is constructed on their behalf by the cinema itself?

In this thesis these questions are theoretically framed within a semiotic methodology, which is applied to the examination of the complexities of representation. This is done through an analysis of the connotations and stereotyping of Indigenous identity in filmic narratives; and the operation of narrative closure and myth making systems through historical time periods; and dualisms in the filmic narratives such as primitive/civilised, us/them, self/other; and the presence of Aboriginality as an absent signifier.

The four films chosen for comparative analysis are *Jedda*, *Night Cries*, *Walkabout* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. These films span a period of fifty years, which allows for an explication of the changes that have occurred over the passing of time in their visual representations of Aboriginal identity. Hence social and cultural filmic identity representations are juxtaposed with the historical and political discourses prevalent at the time of their production. Through such a detailed analysis of the four film texts, the dominant social discourses of Australia are analysed in relation to their operation as representational frameworks for Indigenous Australians.

## Acknowledgements

During the writing of this thesis I have become indebted to many individuals and academic organisations. The following merit particular attention for the advice, assistance and support they have offered me.

Throughout my research I have received guidance and encouragement from my supervisor, Celia Moon. I am extremely grateful for her insight into my work and the manner in which she consistently challenged my thinking to sharpen, focus and improve.

I must also thank Sue Green who provided the initial impetus for my questioning and helped me lay down the framework of my research.

In addition I must thank other academic and administrative staff of the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Centre and the School of Sociology and Anthropology for providing a supportive environment in which to conduct research. In particular I would like to thank Frances Lovejoy from the School of Sociology and Anthropology who has provided me with sound advice right from my very early days at the department.

I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Anne Holmes at Billy Blue Schools for providing me with access to resources at the school and her stalwart surety in my work.

Many of my friends have given me unending encouragement during the writing of this thesis and I wish to thank all of them. I would particularly like to thank: Megan McCarthy for her feedback on an incomprehensible first draft of this work, Laura Fisher for listening to my theoretical musings and providing valuable counter-arguments to include in my research, Jamie Quasar for saving me from editing hiccups.

I would also like to thank my extended family of friends who have worked with me in the trenches of research and helped me battle through the production of this PhD: Garth Thomas for patiently allowing me to ramble about topics of little interest to him, Liz Wilson for her true and pragmatic judgements on work and life, Angela Bishop for her ability to understand the inner workings of page breaks and for working tremendously fast on my language and expression, Dan Simmonds for quite simply – rocking and Stuart Clegg for his calmness at the crucial end stage of writing up and enriching my academic and non-academic life with happiness.

A very special thanks to Shruti Devgan who has provided me with years of friendship, sisterhood and steadfast unfailing belief in my work and self, without which this thesis would never even have been attempted and Sophia Papoutsis, who even from afar acts as a mentor, guide and twin.

My final debt of thanks goes to my family. I would not know where to begin to thank them for their lifetime of support. They provided me with the confidence instrumental in my search for academic rigour. My mother for providing me with strength and love; my sister for her brilliance, professionalism I always strive to copy, compassion and guidance; and most importantly my late father who laid the foundations for who I am as a person today and whose excellence in work and family life I endeavour to emulate. I hope through this thesis I have succeeded in acknowledging the hard work and intellectual merit of his achievements in life.

The terms ‘Indigenous’, ‘Indigenous Australians’, ‘Indigenous people’, and ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Aboriginal Australians’, ‘Aboriginal people’ have been used in this thesis. It recognises that these terms are gaining increasing currency in academia as inclusive terms. This thesis follows the conviction set by Jackie Huggins when she stated:

“a” is for apple, agile, anger, another, address, alphabet, but not Aboriginal. It is insulting and destructive to use a small “a”. This spelling is extremely racist, as are the biologically racist definitions of part, quarter, half-caste and full blood Aborigines.

It is indicative of notions of superiority/inferiority of Blacks and whites in this country. On the basis of white superiority it could be presumed that the initiators of a small “a” subconsciously act out their power games in order to further maintain their privileged position, and to keep Blacks in their “subjugated” line.

The usual excuse is that there has been a “typo”, but I have yet to see “Europeans” or “Australians” in Australian books. Why therefore does the typewriter possess an incredibly persistent disability when it comes to Aboriginal?

My preference is for the term “Aboriginal” both as a noun and adjective. “Aborigines” has long been a term used to classify and demean Aboriginal people in the repressive state of Queensland, particularly by the old Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement. It also assumes an “air of superiority” by a dominant culture and attempts, as does small “a”, to operate as a divide and rule tactic.

**- Huggins, Jackie (1991) *Hecate* Vol. XVII, No 2, p 171**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Make visible what, without you, might perhaps never have been seen.*

(Bresson, 1986: 64)

*Knowledge is never innocent or neutral. It is a key to power and meaning. It is used to dominate and control.*

(Moreton-Robinson, 2000: 93)



This thesis puts forth an offer of a tour through the expanse between the sociological, cultural, textual and historical channels of film and Indigenous representation. It attempts to examine the representations of Indigenous identity within Australian cinema and investigates whether these filmic representations adequately explore Indigenous issues in depth and with cultural resonance.

The interest in conducting such research arose from the observation that there have been several genre surveys, film text guides and articles written about Indigenous representation; but there has been no comprehensive textual analysis of Aboriginal representation in Australian cinema. This thesis thus attempts to engage with the theoretical, discursive, racial, historical, and operational premises of film as a specific representational regime. Theoretically, this thesis relies on semiotic analysis to analyse representational meanings of visual images. It also traces the discursive and racial regimes of Aboriginality and questions identity representation through film texts. This is achieved by a comparative and historical analysis of four films, each of which exemplify a decade in Australian cinema from the 1950s to present.

The key question this thesis asks is: Can a study of cinematic representations really lead to a better understanding of Aboriginal identity? How is Aboriginality depicted in relation to non-Aboriginality and does this depiction present a representational complex for Indigenous Australia which is constructed on their behalf by the cinema itself?

These questions emanated from a reading of the seminal work Sites of Difference, by Karen Jennings, who raises the crucial point that only recently has there been a relatively increasing currency of Aboriginal studies in the academic world. After more than two hundred years of European colonisation, Australia has begun to examine the way in which the colonised group has been viewed and continues to be viewed by the colonisers (Jennings, 1993: 6).

A decade later, Peter Krausz addresses the lack of representation:

In surveying Australian feature film production over the last hundred years, what clearly emerges is a general avoidance of Aboriginal issues, and a lack of any balanced representation of Australia's

significant Indigenous population; *at least that was the case until recently*. Over 1000 films have been produced in Australia, yet I could identify around fifty films that represent Aborigines in any way at all within the narrative. I need to add [though] that *things are changing...* (Krausz, 2003: 90) [Italics own, not the author's]

It is interesting to note that both authors, a decade apart, speak of the *changing ways* in which the academic world and the media have dealt with Aboriginal representation in film. One would have hoped that Krausz, by the year 2003, would be talking about the way in which things have *already changed*. He asks the question, “When will the Australian film industry explore Indigenous issues in more depth and with greater cultural resonance?” (Krausz, 2003: 1) This thesis approaches its questioning with a similar vein of thought.

The initial points of investigation precipitate from a reading of the various studies conducted on filmic Indigenous representation thus far. The thesis is divided into three parts: first, an analysis of Aboriginality and film texts; second, a discussion of visual semiotics; and third, a discussion of four selected films. Altogether this thesis aims to provide a distinctive approach to studying the way in which Australian cinema represents Indigenous identity. There have been varied studies and articles written on Aboriginal representation in film. However, a critique such as this one has not been attempted.

An early substantial study appeared in 1977 when Andrew Pike in Aboriginals in Australian Feature Films makes the claim that “minorities of most types, whether racial, social or political, have rarely received more than peripheral attention from the commercial mainstream of Australian cinema...” (Pike, 1977: 598) He notes that there was either a total absence of major Aboriginal characters in film or that they were relegated to the background as sidekicks to white bushrangers, akin to exotic features of the stark Australian landscape.

Pike also interestingly makes the claim that Aboriginal characters were rarely the objects of explicit racism in Australian cinema. Jennings (1993) and Langton (1993) later reiterate this point. Langton notes, “racial discrimination, while a problem, is

not necessarily intentional but is a particular factor underlying specific and/or general encounters between Aborigines and filmmakers.” (Langton, 1993: 27-28) Frances Peters-Little recently commented, “I am yet to meet anyone who makes a film solely for the purpose of inciting racial hatred.” (Peters-Little, 2003: 17) This study investigates the extent to which racist representations are intentional. The concept that therefore frames this study revolves around the fine line that exists between racist and romantic representation (Stephen Muecke 1982, 1992). Hence it is not sufficient to focus singularly on Aboriginal characterisation and content in film texts, but also the ‘generic qualities’ of these film texts, which determine if Australian films reinforce romanticized clichés of Aboriginal identity leading ultimately to racist representations. Whether these romanticised clichés are reinforced or not through film texts is a critical starting point for the questions asked here.

The first of such questions revolves around how Aboriginal identity is constructed within film texts. Does looking at the generic qualities of film texts offer a more intricate analysis of the techniques used in films? Ultimately these generic qualities are based on social dynamics and lead to identity representations. Moore and Muecke look at the use of “filmic codes and techniques as they are articulated with social institutions and policies.” (Moore & Muecke, 1984: 36) Tracing the historical emergence of the discourses in filmic representations of Aboriginal people, Moore and Muecke outline three processes by which Indigenous identity is constructed. The first are the paternalistic assimilationist formations, which they connect to films from the fifties and sixties. Next is the liberal multiculturalist formation, which they locate in the seventies and eighties. The third is a leftist independent formation deriving from Aboriginal community control.

Moore and Muecke investigate how the racist unitary constructions of Aboriginal characters in film reduce political issues to personal stories. Such an investigation links to this thesis’ era-wise analysis of films. It also links to the issue of how representational frameworks of Indigenous identity articulated within film texts suggest reductions of wider social issues to ‘personal stories’. This increases the affinity felt by the audience to Indigenous issues presented to them on screen, thereby increasing audience identification.

All films ultimately aim for such audience identification. However, for this thesis audience identification becomes a critical point of analysis because the existence of representational frameworks means that certain representations of Aboriginal identity are ‘naturalised’ to audiences. An example of a naturalised representational framework in film texts is the fusion of nature with culture. Aboriginal culture’s affinity with the land is seen as being opposed to ‘high culture’, which is taken as the “highly acculturated city life of the whites.” (Moore and Muecke, 1984: 38) This articulated representational framework is but one example of the way in which the fine line between racist and romantic representation might be breached. This study will examine more such examples when it analyses selected film texts.

Ten years after Pike’s article on the peripheral nature of Aboriginal film roles, Peter Malone published In Black and White and Colour, a book devoted to a survey of Aboriginal people in film. Malone argues that his book is a “tracing of the history of attitudes through these screen presentations-both *what* is presented and *how* it is presented.” (Malone, 1987: xii) However the book concentrates more on ‘what is presented’ and for the most part ignores generic conventions and representational frameworks within the film texts. He alludes to them only briefly when he, for example, speaks of *Jedda*’s ‘grand opera’ stance (Malone, 1987: 23) and *Manganinnie*’s ‘fable-like’ qualities (Malone, 1987: 38).

Malone’s work, while comprehensive and timely, does not offer a consistent theorising of the films he presents for analysis. However, he concludes his book with an engaging statement, on the “signs of creativity and hope” (Malone, 1987: 139) in Australian Indigenous cinematic representations. This is arguably what the subtext of this thesis attempts to examine. Can we look for ‘signs of creativity and hope’ in Australian cinema’s representation of Indigenous people? Has Malone’s prediction come to fruition in terms of cinematic representations of Indigenous identity?

Before launching into the thesis, this section of the introduction will commence with an outline of the definitions, ideas, theoretical concepts and literature used; in short the milieu of this thesis. Why does this thesis ask the questions it asks and what is the basis for such an analysis? This thesis is organized into three parts that examine the relationship between Aboriginality and film texts, cinema and visual semiotics, and the changing representations of Indigenous identity in Australian cinema.

**Part One** focuses on the literature surrounding the debates on Aboriginality and film texts. It begins with the obvious departure point of the rationale for studying cinematic representations: why choose to study cinematic representations at all? The simple answer to this is that film is an influential and compelling medium.

Graeme Turner in National Fictions considers film the twentieth century storyteller and affirms, “It is the model through which we articulate the world. Thus the study of film...eventually and necessarily becomes a study of representation.” (Turner, 1993: 9) Hence for this thesis, and indeed for any study on representation, cinema initiates crucial points for investigation. It is the popular medium through which representation is made real to an audience. It arises from a set of material and institutional practices that make representation more real. Hence audiences are also firmly located within film texts, as every assertion regarding the cinema evokes an image of a viewing audience. “The media do not simply reflect reality. Rather they utilise certain conventions and codes, both aesthetic and technical to represent things to us. These things may then be accepted as ‘real’ or ‘natural’.” (Jennings, 1993: 9) Understanding that cinematic representation is made ‘real’ to an audience brings into question the knowledge of these seemingly real representations.

What are films letting Australian audiences ‘know’ about Aboriginal identity? Marcia Langton supports the idea that it is through filmic visual narratives that most Australians ‘know’ about Aboriginal people. Interestingly she then suggests the fact that most of these representations are “figures of the imagination generated by Australian image producers. They are safe, distant distortions of an actual world of people...” (Langton, 1993: 33) Australians might think they ‘know’ Jedda and Marbuk from *Jedda* (1955), Jimmie from *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978),

Molly and Joe from *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986), Nona from *Radiance* (1998) or Mudoo from *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), but is this really the case?

Such scrutiny of the Aboriginal 'Other' revolves around the literature surrounding Orientalism and the 'Other'. Orientalism is related to the operation of Aboriginalism in Australia and its impact can be seen in the production of films about Indigenous people. Does the cinema represent reality whilst dealing with questions of race and Aboriginality?

Literature surrounding Aboriginalism and Orientalism is analysed further in the next chapter. Here it is suffice to mention that the question of the 'Other' was significantly raised by Edward Said in Orientalism, in which he applied the concept of Orientalism to define the necessity felt by the dominant culture to provide a surrogate self-definition vis-à-vis its difference with the 'Other'.

Vijay Mishra in Aboriginal Representations in Australian Texts further extended this ideological construct of Orientalism and compared it to the triumph of 'Aboriginalism' in Australia. "...Aboriginalism, like Orientalism, simply confirmed prejudices based on doctrines of evolutionary difference and intellectual inferiority." (Mishra, 1988: 167) Aboriginalism as a construct of power relations in Australia runs parallel to Orientalism.

This thesis investigates whether the existing discourse of film, with its varying degrees of generic qualities and presuppositions, displays hegemonic constructs of power relations as those described by Aboriginalism and Orientalism. Homi Bhabha considered particular discourses to operate as an "apparatus of power" (Bhabha, 1983: 18-36). Does Australian cinema merely reflect the operation of Aboriginalism? This thesis investigates this question in greater depth and argues that Aboriginalism is a construct of power operational within Australian cinema.

Robert Hodge states in Aboriginal Truth and White Media that "the foundation premise of Aboriginalism is the construction of Aboriginals as 'primitive', in a binary opposition to 'civilised'." (Hodge, 1990: 3) The study of binary oppositions within film texts forms a foundational study within the semiotic analysis elucidated

later in this thesis. It links back to Moore and Muecke's (1984) argument of racist articulated frameworks within film texts, which oppose 'primitive' Aboriginal culture to the so-called acculturated 'civilised' life of the non-Indigenous.

The operation of Aboriginalism tends to structurally marginalize Aboriginal people from Australian histories as well. Bill Stanner in After The Dreaming regards this as a "cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale" (Stanner, 1968: 25), which accounts for the marginalisation of a whole section of the Australian populace. What is interesting is that this marginalisation is also present in visual narratives. Aboriginal people have been viewed from "a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape" and have been relegated to "melancholy footnotes" (Stanner, 1968: 26). However, Jennings (1993) does cite a few exceptions to this, including films such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), *Short Changed* (1986), *Backlash* (1986), and *Deadly* (1990). Understandably, Stanner's viewpoint relates to the world of film before 1968, while Jennings's examples are more recent. Nonetheless it is intriguing to note Jennings's use of the term 'few exceptions'. This would imply that the films she cites are the exceptions and not the rule. The latter part of this thesis will discuss the textual features and generic conventions of four specific films and explore the ways in which such exceptions, as the ones alluded to by Jennings, are presented on screen.

At this point it is also necessary to outline the relationship between race and Aboriginality as they are terms that will recur throughout this thesis. Stuart Hall maintains, "The media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be" (Hall, 1982: 57). Hence a study of race is inevitably relevant to cinematic representation, both as a way of recognising the essentialist ways in which Aboriginality has been constructed in this medium and the ideological basis for its construction in the popular discourse of film.

Aboriginality itself is a cultural construction, which takes place at various levels. As Marcia Langton states unequivocally, "Aboriginality is a social thing" (Langton, 1993: 31). This is not only reminiscent of Hall's conception of race as a social

category, but also alludes to the complexity of the experiences involved in being 'Aboriginal'.

How can a study of film begin to fathom these cultural constructions? One way is by questioning identity and the nature of the problem of 'truth'. Fictional narratives such as those in the cinema, highlight contradictions at the social level, but cannot resolve them. This relates in particular to the fact that identities themselves are always in a process of continual formulation and reformulation. Film being a cultural production, raises issues of truthful representations. Therefore to juxtapose Aboriginal identity and truth to its cinematic representation we need to attend to a range of signs that relate to the historical and also social landscape. Only then can an enquiry into the art form that is the medium of cinema begin.

**Part Two** of this thesis deals with a visual semiotic analysis of the cinema and asks: how can information regarding the complexities of representation be extracted from a visual analysis? At a base level images are recorders of reality. As Bryson argues, "Film and video are cultural artefacts" (Bryson, 2002: 99) and as such allow for a visual representation quite unlike "the deceptive world of words." (Collier, 2002: 59)

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. This is seen through the representations of identity by the cinema. A study of Aboriginal representations in the cinema necessarily interrogates certain (re)presentations of Aboriginal images on screen and the hidden meanings of these images. Hence semiotics is used in this thesis to investigate the purposes for which visual signs may be used in films representing Aboriginal reality.

This thesis applies Metzian semiology as a model to explain how meaning is embodied within the film text. Christian Metz in Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema asserts succinctly, "A film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand". (Metz, 1974: 69) It constructs reality itself and caters to millions of people and in doing so makes absolutely no demands on the viewing public.



Mishra, in his article about the operation of Aboriginalism in representation argues that:

The eye of the camera may be specularly identified with that of the viewer who in turn identifies with the hero/heroine's gaze. This specular identification makes the 'cinematic syntagm' a 'dream syntagm' which has an unconscious structure of meaning. (Mishra, 1988: 179)

This lends particular weight to the claim that members of a common culture are linked through shared responses to particular themes presented to them through the 'eye of the camera'. These shared responses are akin to mythic discourses, which are elaborated further in the methodological enquiry of this thesis.

Joseph Campbell in The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1975) asserts that myths have the nature of dreams and are symptomatic of the nature of the psyche. As Molloy suggests, myths, like films, are seen to have affinities with dreams (Molloy, 1990: 6). Myths serve as a powerful picture language for the communication of traditional wisdom. By using the term 'picture language', Campbell is supporting the role that myths play in the social imaginary; which ultimately is the collective around which cultures organise perceptions of social reality. The audience is allowed to immerse themselves in an unconscious identification with the narrative on screen, making cinema a powerful representational tool.

This 'cinematic syntagm' helps us move into the realm of semiotic analysis, where the process of constructing reality itself is documented and questioned, and more importantly into Metzian semiology, which gives a model to explain how a film creates and embodies meaning for an audience. Metz focuses on the significance of the fact that the process of identification directly relates to film comprehension. Semiology in relation to the process of identification forms ideological structurations (Hall, 1982; Jennings, 1993: 9) located within a film, marking it as a component *of* and *within* identification. These ideological structurations may take the form of certain techniques of structuring meaning within the film narrative, which translate to an audience. Metzian semiology in this sense approaches the raw material of the

cinema not as reality itself, but as the various channels of information that make up a film, such as image, speech, music, sound effects, and so on. Delving further, Metzian semiology concerns itself with the logical structures which operate on this material and which account for meaning being transmitted to an audience. This thesis will use Metz's idea of the "filmographic film as perceived by the audience" (Cozyris, 1979: 58) and will also look at film as a signifying system.

Film's signifying practice is analysed in this thesis not just in terms of its manifest 'message' but also in terms of its ideological structuration. Hence for a study on Aboriginal representation this ideological structuration becomes important because the channels of information transmitted to an audience are not merely a cinematic mechanism, but are also a way through which the accuracy of certain forms of representation might be interrogated.

From the perspective of a semiotic methodology, how does this study specifically locate audiences? Pioneering research into film audiences was motivated by the anxiety felt about the social consequences of the medium's popularity (Meers, 2001). The potential of film to influence 'the masses' was central to seminal contributions to theories about film as a textual form (Gripsrud, 1998: 202). When film studies became established as an academic discipline in the 1960s, it was devoted to studies of films-as-texts and sociological studies of the audience were regarded as irrelevant (Gripsrud, 1998: 208). The audience appeared in film theory in the 1970s where it was embedded in semiotic and later psychoanalytic analyses. The viewer however remained an abstraction, i.e., the implied viewer or the ideal viewer of the text (Prince, 1996: 83). The 1980s and 1990s brought a new interest in film audiences and a shift away from considering them to be monolithic, to considering them to be heterogeneous.

This thesis is positioned within the latter approach and engages with the extension of Metzian semiotics (Bordwell 1985, Carroll, 1996), through studying the viewer empirically as an autonomous, rational being; following a schemata and mental sets (Elsaesser, 1993: 42). Mental sets are defined here as the human responses to ideological structurations and simply as the reaction of audiences to film texts. Eventually "we must take into account not only the circumstances in which they

[films] are displayed but also the mental sets audiences bring, which condition how they receive what they witness” (Whittock, 1990: 23).

The use of the term ‘mental sets’ is engaging for a study on Aboriginal representation in film texts. Does the narrative of the film simply *inform* the audience about Aboriginal identity, or does it *conform* to the pre-existing mental sets of the audience, which ultimately are a reflection of the prevailing social conditions and notions about Aboriginal identity?

This thesis does not offer an ethnographic study of media audiences. Rather it attempts to analyse each viewer as a member of an audience witnessing a performance, sitting in a darkened theatre, attention focussed on a two-dimensional picture within the boundary of a frame, thus marking the viewing of a film as a unique experience for each and every member of that audience.

Essentially a semiotics of film develops a ‘language’ to use in talking about film signs and presupposes the development of a methodology for describing and determining them. While application of semiotic analysis to film texts has been varied, most analyses ask the questions “of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the ‘hidden meanings’ of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?)” (Van Leeuwen, 2002: 92). These ideas are used as central themes in this study. They provide a detailed method for analysing representational and interactional meanings established by the syntactic relations between the people, places and things depicted in visual images and their significance to Aboriginal representation.

This thesis also examines Barthian visual semiotics, a theory premised on the idea of layered meanings. Images consist of a layer of representational or denotative meaning (who and what are depicted) on which is superimposed a layer of connotative or symbolic meaning (what it all means). Does this connotative layer operate through the cultural associations which cling to the represented people, places, and things? Or does it operate through specific ‘connotators’, these being

distinct aspects of the way in which they are represented, such as the ‘camera eye’ and specific filming techniques such as montage, mise-en-scenes against which the Aboriginal hero/heroine is pictured, other protagonists in the frame, and so on. Interestingly Roland Barthes in Mythologies suggests that connotative meanings form myths, which condense everything associated with the represented people, places or things into a single entity, and also form ideological meanings that serve to legitimate the status quo (Barthes, 1970).

The Levi-Straussian analysis of myth sociologically links narrative back to Barthes’ conceptualisation. Claude Levi-Strauss in The Savage Mind analyses mythology and structured myths around systems of binary opposites. Mythological analysis can further explicate film narratives by helping us to consider that the patterning of textual elements such as incident and character also operate in pairs of opposites such as nature/culture, savage/civilised and so on (Molloy, 1990: 2). Levi-Strauss asserts that in advanced societies the equivalent of primitive myths are cultural productions such as art, literature and film. Myth and film would then seem to have a common concern, “the construction of a world they appear only to describe” (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 263).

From the point of view of such an analysis, film serves the ideological function of transforming history into nature, and legitimising the dominant culturally driven institutions by presenting them on screen as ‘given’ or ‘natural’. This point is analysed later in this thesis through the operation of narrative closure in film texts which serve to legitimate the status quo. This thesis also examines whether film narratives with Aboriginal characters reveal the reality of the institutions and structures of a wider Australian society in which they are ultimately constructed or whether they merely provide narratives which are ‘popular’.

**Part Three** analyses the changes in cinematic representations of Indigenous identity through an examination of four films. This study recognises that it is intrinsically difficult to accurately convey the changing relationship between cinema and Indigenous identity. However a study of film can inform an understanding of representation in varied ways by analysing the changes that have occurred in the themes of filmic texts. Changes in cinematic representations of Indigenous identity

anticipate, overlap, and generate changes in the identity of the Indigenous community as a whole.

To enable a sufficiently detailed examination of film texts, this study will not include ethnographic films, documentaries, experimental shorts, or those films released for television only, and will focus on a select list of cinematic releases. However, the one exception to this is the experimental short: Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*. The choice to include *Night Cries* derives from the fact that Chauvel's *Jedda*, which is a critical starting point for this thesis, provided the inspiration for *Night Cries*. Hence an analysis of *Night Cries* juxtaposed with *Jedda* allows for further exploration of the arguments pertinent to this thesis.

A brief overview of Aboriginal representation in filmic genres in Australia shows that up until the 1930s Australian silent cinema represented Aboriginal characters as members of evil hordes which obstruct colonisation. This tendency culminated in two films: *Uncivilised* (Charles Chauvel, 1936) and *A Nation is Built* (Frank Hurley, 1938). The former was Chauvel's drama about an upper class woman kidnapped by a white man and his Aboriginal attendant, while the latter, celebrating 150 years of Australian settlement, dramatised the colonisation of Australia by depicting Aboriginal people as hostile and ignorant.

By the 1950s *Bitter Springs* (Ralph Smart, 1950), a film about a family battling an Aboriginal tribe for a water hole, and *The Phantom Stockman* (Lee Robinson, 1953), an Australian 'western' set in Alice Springs, managed to rekindle the interest in Aboriginal characters in mainstream cinema. However, this period was also notable for *Jedda*, whose message was consistent with Australia's Assimilationist policies. Chauvel's film company ceased to exist shortly after the film's box office failure. The final commercial disaster of a 1950s film-maker's attempts at making an Aboriginal themed film was *Dust in the Sun* (Lee Robinson, 1958) which dealt with an Aboriginal prisoner being taken to a murder trial by a Northern territory police officer.

The 1960s attempt to rectify the lack of Aboriginal representation was *Journey Out of Darkness* (James Trainor, 1967). With a plot reminiscent of *Dust in the Sun* it

bore a title that betrayed the film's view of Aboriginality. Ironically it was white actor Ed Devereaux who played the role of an Aboriginal tracker and Sri-Lankan born singer Kamahl who played the role of the Aboriginal killer.

The emergence of more challenging films in the 1970s was epitomised by *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1971), which traversed symbolic territory and managed to garner popular and critical acclaim. *Come Out Fighting* (Nigel Busset, 1973) a film about Aboriginal boxer Al 'The Bomb' Dawson facing a crisis in his life; *Mad Dog Morgan* (Philip Mora, 1976) which portrayed the life of the bushranger Dan Morgan and an Aboriginal boy, Billy, as his sole friend and ally; *Eliza Fraser* (Tim Burstall, 1976) a tale of a shipwrecked, lustful woman who encounters a friendly Aboriginal group; and *Storm Boy* (Henri Safran, 1976), a film about a white boy's friendship with an Aboriginal boy, brought Indigenous subject matter to the foreground of film making.

However it was the 'edgy thrillers' of the 1970s that vigorously demonstrated that the 'mainstreaming' of Indigenous Australia had begun. These included *Backroads* (Philip Noyce, 1977), *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977), and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978). It was this last that highlighted powerfully the clash between Aboriginal and white cultures and caused extensive debate about Australian racial attitudes, similar to the debates caused by the release of *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002) nearly 25 years later.

In the 1980s more Indigenous characters were incorporated into storylines including *Manganinnie* (John Honey, 1980), which is about the 1830s massacre in Tasmania, *Wrong Side of the Road* (Ned Lander, 1981), a dramatised documentary about two Aboriginal rock bands, and *We of the Never Never* (Igor Auzins, 1982) which addressed the theme of reconciliation. The clash of cultures that occurred over the issue of nuclear testing was the topic of *Where the Ants Dream* (Werner Herzog, 1984) while *The Naked Country* (Tim Burstall, 1984) highlighted the land battles between white land owners and local Aboriginal people. These films engaged with the socio-political struggles that had been ignited in the 1980s, as did *Short Changed* (George Ogilvie, 1985), *Backlash* (Bill Bennett, 1986), and *The Fringe Dwellers* (Bruce Beresford, 1986). These films contained representations of the underlying

cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and they also engaged with the theme of reconciliation.

A shift in themes from generalised narratives to individual experiences was seen in the 1990s in *Jindalee Lady* (Brian Syron, 1990), the story of a young Aboriginal woman who sets out to build a career in the fashion industry; *Until the End of the World* (Wim Wenders, 1991), which is about an Aboriginal man providing the healing power for the ills of the world; *Deadly* (Esben Storm, 1992), which is set against the backdrop of Aboriginal deaths in custody; *Bedevil* (Tracey Moffatt, 1993), three ghost stories which challenge racial stereotypes, and *Blackfellas* (James Ricketson, 1993), a realistic portrayal of the attempts of an Aboriginal ex-prisoner to go straight. *The Life of Harry Dare* (Aleski Vellis, 1994) was a tale of a middle class Aboriginal man and his family while *Dead Heart* (Nick Parsons, 1996) attempted to mesh Aboriginal cultural themes with a small town drama reminiscent of wider tensions in the Australian community. *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998) told the story of the reunion of three Aboriginal sisters after the death of their mother. The insights into Aboriginal life and the differing perspectives on assimilation within the film are compelling. Therefore there was a proliferation of films with Indigenous themes in the latter half of the last century.

The films chosen for this thesis have been selected according to criteria which relate to the questions asked in this thesis. The first and most important criterion for selection is whether the film has relevance to the concerns of the thesis, and whether certain claims about indigenous identity are embedded in the film's visual representation and narrative. The next criterion is the reception of the film, in the sense of actual narrative appeal and resonance for the audience, which relies on a variety of sources such as contemporary and retrospective critical reception articulated through newspaper, journal, and magazine reviews, and reference texts. A third criterion is the impact of the film in public memory, in terms of a lasting influence on the style and content of subsequent films and its cultural resonance.

The films selected for this thesis span a wide range of genres and styles. Therefore it is not adequate to merely discuss their content and the key issues they address. Rather the analysis will also examine the ways in which the narrative unfolds and

how the characters are developed through it. Consequently this thesis is not merely a survey of the literature available on Aboriginal representations in Australian cinema, it also considers the ways in which representational frameworks are articulated through film texts.

The films chosen for analysis span a period of fifty years, which allows for an explication of the changes that may or may not have occurred in visual representation through the passing of various eras. The common themes that run through all these films pertain to the criteria mentioned earlier. The chosen films might not meet all three criteria but all four of the films meet at least one, especially the third criterion of the impact of the film in public memory.

Hence filmic texts play a large role in the analysis undertaken in this thesis. The study itself will refer to various films throughout its examination (a detailed description of all the films referred to in this study is included in Appendix I). Specifically this thesis is not a general survey of films about Indigenous representation: only four films are treated with real depth. This approach has been taken because it is important to address in detail the representations of Indigenous identity present in these films.

The four films examined in detail begin with *Jedda* (Director and Producer: Charles Chauvel, Screenplay: Charles Chauvel and Elsa Chauvel, 1955). This film was Charles Chauvel's final attempt at portraying European-Aboriginal cultural relations. It has long been regarded as a seminal production in which Chauvel tried to portray the position of the repressed and therefore acknowledge Australia's unspeakable past (Mishra, 1988: 179). It is not a straightforward narrative but has a style more akin to a 'grand opera' (Malone, 1988: 23). "It probably has more impact now than it did in the 50s...audience alertness to the implications of the film is much keener." (Malone, 1988: 22) Here lies the importance of using this film as the starting point for analysis in this thesis.

*Night Cries* (Director and Screenplay: Tracey Moffatt, Producer: Penny McDonald, 1990) is juxtaposed with *Jedda* and also analysed in further detail. In this film Tracey Moffatt resurrects the two central characters in *Jedda* and propels them thirty years



into the future, where the transforming relationship between mother and child is explored. These facets will be discussed as part of the analysis of the two film texts.

A British film made in Australia, *Walkabout* (Director: Nicholas Roeg, Producer: Si Litvinoff, Screenplay: Edward Bond, based on the novel by James Vance Marshall, 1971) serves as a transitional film where interaction between white and Aboriginal cultures is explored very differently from previous efforts in the 1950s and 1960s. The fact that it became a cult film in England and the United States, but was only moderately received by local audiences, is interesting for this study insofar as it focuses on audiences. It was criticised for its factual inaccuracies and lack of realism. “But when the film is perceived and responded to as a poem, an exploration of images, colour and music of the land, then it has much to offer. It is a walkabout for the audiences” (Malone, 1988: 31).

*Rabbit Proof Fence* (Director and Producer: Philip Noyce, Christine Olsen, John Winter, Screenplay: Christine Olsen, Based on the book by Doris Pilkington, 2002) is a story about three little girls who make an extraordinary journey home in the 1930s. This story may seem exceptional, but it is in fact typical in the historical context of the widespread abduction of Aboriginal children. Noyce treats the past carefully, avoiding any ‘good versus evil’ dramatisations of Australian colonial history (Villella, 2003) and instead relies on absorbing the audience with tragic, somewhat melodramatic sequences and romanticised clichés of Aboriginal identity. This recapitulates the question asked earlier on the fine line between racist and romantic representations. The question of what kinds of representations of Indigenous identity are articulated in this film through its storytelling will be explored in this analysis.

In contextualising the change in historical situations of Aboriginal-white relations with the different film texts chosen for analysis, it is worth mentioning briefly the impact of colonisation and its history. For Aboriginal people, the colonisation of Australia was swift and complete by the arrival of the first fleet and the declaration of ‘Terra Nullius’ to justify theft of the land. The immediate consequences of this invasion manifested itself in the spread of diseases and the destruction of Aboriginal spiritual, social and cultural beliefs. This destruction continued throughout the 19<sup>th</sup>

and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries through the implementation of various programmes and policies put in place by the government to ensure the death of Aboriginal culture. These policies generally followed the Social Darwinist belief that Aboriginal people belonged to a ‘doomed race’ and that their ultimate absorption into ‘mainstream society’ would benefit them. Thus the Protection and Assimilation policies aimed at cultural and biological absorption. In the context of this thesis and its basis of analysis beginning in 1950s Australia and ending in 2002, it becomes important to mention the history of the changing Aboriginal-white relations in the time period looked at here. Australia of the 1950s presents a period of Australian history steeped in the Assimilationist viewpoint that Aboriginal people were an ‘inferior dying race’. The stereotype of Aboriginal people being ‘inferior’ was firmly entrenched in the contemporary context of Chauvel’s *Jedda* (1955). Very few Aboriginal people were in ‘public sight’ at the time of its production. This can directly be contrasted to the change in this relation by the time of production of Noyce’s *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), which arose out of the public awareness of the Stolen Generations narrative through the publication of the Bringing Them Home Report (1997). Similarly, the narratives of *Walkabout* (1971) and *Night Cries* (1990) were influenced by the movement towards reconciliation and change. Such changes in the historical and political milieu mark changes in the production of film texts studied here. Detailed accounts of the changes in historical discourse are discussed with the analysis of film texts later in the thesis.

This introduction has outlined the three parts of this thesis. It has also initiated the line of questioning that underpins it. The next part will discuss the literature surrounding representation, filmic texts, race, Aboriginality, and identity formation.

**PART I**  
**ABORIGINALITY AND FILM TEXTS: LITERATURE**  
**REVIEW**

*To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation.*

(Fanon, 1967: 11)

*Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time.*

(Bahba, 1990: 1)

In examining the various literary texts which define, interpret, and clarify the questions asked in this study of the representations of Indigenous identity within Australian cinema, the following broad categorisations will be elucidated in this part:

- Aboriginalism and Orientalism
- The reality of film
- Location of audiences
- The notion of 'Truth'
- Race and Aboriginality
- Questions on identity

Within each category of studies undertaken in this area, certain questions will be formulated and discussed throughout the thesis. The literary texts reviewed here do not only inform this study but also lay the foundations for the following Methodology in this thesis.

## Chapter 1: Aboriginalism and Orientalism

The recent interest outlined in the Introduction and expressed by Jennings (1993) and Krausz (2003) on the increasing currency of Aboriginal studies in the academic world might merely conform with the necessity felt by the dominant white Australian culture to provide a surrogate self definition through identification of its differences with the Aboriginal 'Other'. This is similar to a question raised by Edward Said in Orientalism and his analysis of a "disregarding, essentialising and denuding" (Said, 1978: 108) European culture which tries to represent and contain another culture.

Vijay Mishra in Aboriginal Representations in Australian Texts (1988) further extended this ideological construct to parallel Hegelian discourse, as constitutive of Orientalism, and the triumph of 'Aboriginalism' in Australia. Mishra's use of Hegel corresponds with his knowledge of Indian Orientalism. In The Philosophy of Fine Art (1975) Hegel reduced Hindu thought to "Fantastic Symbolism", a term which, for Mishra, implies an absence of historical consciousness in the Hindu.

In Dark Side of the Dream Mishra asserts:

The corresponding premise in Aboriginalism is the concept of 'the Dreamtime', which refers to a complex of aspects of traditional Aboriginal belief, including mythology, law and history. All commentators agree that it is untranslatable and incomprehensible to (other) Europeans...as in Orientalism a warm positivity about this mystical incapacity masks the political function and meaning of the move... (Hodge & Mishra, 1991: 27)

Hence the symbolised lack of thought of the 'Other' in Orientalism, defined as 'Fantastic Symbolism', is juxtaposed with the perceived lack of thought in Aboriginal belief systems.

As Ashcroft and Ahluwalia in Edward Said state, "European knowledge, by relentlessly constructing its subject within the discourse of Orientalism, was able to maintain hegemonic power over it." (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001: 53) Focusing on this aspect of Orientalism, Said was able to elaborate it as "one of the most profound

examples of the machinery of cultural domination, a metonymy of the process of imperial control and one that continues to have its repercussions in contemporary life.” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001: 53-54). This meant that Aboriginalism as an extension of Orientalism as a particular ideological structure of thought, allowed for a kind of intellectual, cultural and material construction of colonial hegemony.

This analogous connection not only presents an argument for Aboriginal exclusion but also for the extension of a colonial ‘gaze’ on Aboriginal issues and their representation. For Said, Orientalist discourse confirmed “the web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, de-humanizing ideology...” (Said, 1978: 27). This might read as a similar discourse for Aboriginalism. Genres and conventions can govern and dictate representation of identity. In Australia this has taken place through the intervention of a type of colonial ‘gaze’ and understanding of Aboriginal identity, which has been insensitive to the strengths of Aboriginal culture.

Bain Attwood and John Arnold in Power, Knowledge and Aborigines (1992) deal with Indigenous representation and state that Aboriginalism, like Orientalism, is a mode of discourse which produces authoritative and essentialist truths about Indigenous people. It is characterised by a mutually supporting relationship between power and knowledge. They draw on Said’s concept of Orientalism to argue that Aboriginalism as a mode of discourse comprises of three dimensions. First, Aboriginal studies and the teaching, research, or display of scholarly knowledge about Indigenous people by the non-Indigenous, who ostensibly claim to know more about Aboriginal issues than Aboriginal people could possibly know themselves. Second, a general style of thought which is based upon a fundamental distinction between ‘Them’ and ‘Us’. In this form the non-Indigenous imagine the Indigenous as the ‘Other’, as being radically different from themselves. Finally, in the erection of some corporate institution for exercising authority over Aboriginal people by making statements about them, authorising views of them, and ruling over them such as, for example, a government Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

Through the operation of Aboriginalism, there is a tendency to find that from Australian histories, Aboriginal people have been structurally marginalized. The operation of Aboriginalism seeps into the cultural productions of the cinema as well.

Andrew Pike in Aboriginals in Australian Films states that the “...commercial mainstream of Australian cinema, has always been the domain of the white urban middle class.” (Pike, 1977: 598) Almost twenty years after Pike makes this claim, Briann Kearney reaffirms it in Aboriginal Cultural Identity. “Aboriginal people are never shown as anything else but victims, drunks, slum dwellers...” (Kearney, 1993: 57).

Bill Stanner in After The Dreaming regarded this representation of Aboriginal characters on screen as a “cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale” (Stanner, 1968: 25) which accounted for the marginalisation of a whole section of the Australian populace from visual narratives. Aboriginal people have been viewed from “a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape” and have been relegated to “melancholy footnotes” (Stanner, 1968: 26).

Another explanation for the ‘cult of forgetfulness’; came from Bruce Molloy in Before the Interval where he expresses the opinion of Ken G. Hall that “films about Aborigines are death at the box office” (Molloy, 1990: 124). Even as recently as 2002, Garry Maddox observes that “mainstream movie-going Australia doesn’t seem interested in Aboriginal stories” (Maddox, 2002: 4).

So it might be hard to locate Aboriginal people in mainstream Australian cinema, yet as E. Ann Kaplan in Aborigines, Film and Moffat’s ‘Night Cries’ realises, “Once one becomes aware of their absence, suddenly in a way they are present” (Kaplan, 1989: 13). It is this absence of Aboriginal characters from filmic narratives that also catalyses scrutiny about the extent to which an alien discourse, that of mainstream cinema, can be used to make sense of the images presented on screen, to essentially situate Aboriginal people “on any level, least of all in person” (Kaplan, 1989: 13). The solution as Kaplan considers might lie in a contemporary cultural dialogue best embodied in the spirit of film.

## Chapter 2: The Reality of Film

Hence can a study of cinematic representation really lead to a better understanding of Aboriginal identity? The question one is forced to ask next is: Why choose to specifically study cinematic representations at all?

As articulated in the previous chapter, film is an influential media because it uses things and subjects which are taken as real representations. Not only does it express the subjectivity of the filmmaker but it arises from a set of material and institutional practices that make the representation more real.

Stuart Hall in The Rediscovery of Ideology points out that representation implies a process of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping ideas. It is not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labour of “making things mean” (Hall, 1982: 64). In making real representations, films carry this ‘making things mean’ message to the general viewing public. In this lies the popularity of the medium.

Sam Rohdie in National Fiction explains,

Australia is dominated by the realistic. Film is more realistic...because it is more sensate, more passionate, less cold and intellectual. It is more popular...and hence more truly representative of the national. It tells us about our world...best. (Rohdie, 1987: 156)

Rohdie is reviewing the work of Graeme Turner in the area of how constructions of Australian narratives occur through literature and film. Turner himself goes on to state in his work National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative that realism itself is not coded, that it cannot be taken as merely linguistic, because its coding consists “in the illusion that its messages come direct, unmediated; while modern works may only present us with signs. Realistic works seem to present us with Truth” (Rohdie, 1987: 156).



Jennings extends the idea that reality within the media is encoded and states:

The media do not simply reflect reality. Rather they utilise certain conventions and codes, both aesthetic and technical to represent things to us. These things may then be accepted as 'real' or 'natural'.  
(Jennings, 1993: 9)

Walter Benjamin in Illuminations also suggests that film gives rise to new possibilities of meaning, new expressions and a totally different mode of dissemination and distribution (Benjamin, 1973: 219-253). Mishra furthers this claim - "with film, each moment of the text is wholly original or wholly new as it can be made accessible in an equally authentic form to a vast audience at the same time" (Mishra, 1988: 178). The strength of film as a popular medium lies not only in the fact that it gives rise to more 'realistically' perceived representations but that it is also accessible to a vast number of people at the same time in an undiminished form.

The cinema caters to millions of people and in doing so makes absolutely no demands on the viewing public. This is why Christian Metz states in Film Language that in film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical, making the sign of cinema a short-circuit sign. It is the fact of this short-circuit sign that makes the language of film so difficult to assess. Film apparently duplicates reality and can therefore seem transparent.

Metz remarks that similar to still photography there is a way to trace the past spectacle. Cinema might similarly be experienced as a trace of past motion. However, this is not so, because the spectator always sees movement as being present. So "the movie spectator is absorbed, not by a 'has been there', but by a sense of 'there it is'" (Metz, 1974: 8). Thus it is this very ease of visual communication that makes films so accessible to audiences. For translation to an audience, there is nothing that surpasses the 'magic of the cinema'. As Turner in National Fictions states, "film takes words out of narrative and replaces them with sights and sounds, appealing directly to the senses...film offers us a sensuous metaphor for the experience of an event rather than an ironic or reflective understanding of its significance" (Turner, 1993: 15).

The difference between language and film has formed the basis of many objections to the notion of a 'cinematic metaphor'. Calvin Pryluck in The Film Metaphor (1975) emphasises that film as a language does not function in the way verbal languages do. Trevor Whittock in Metaphor and Film considers words to be visual signifiers only, which "do not normally possess qualities in common with the objects to which they refer" (Whittock, 1990: 21). Peter Wollen confirms this in Signs and Meaning in the Cinema where he states, "a symbolic sign demands neither resemblance to its objects nor any existential bond with it. It is conventional" (Wollen, 1969: 102). Wollen acknowledges that film images do share something with the objects they denote. Whittock continues that "film images testify to the presence of objects in a direct way that words do not. The existential link with a pre-existent world outside the film is also a mark of cinema that written accounts lack" (Whittock, 1990: 22).

### Chapter 3: Location of Audiences

Lapsley and Westlake in Film Theory state that the apparently simple act of spectating involves theories of representation, of morality, of human spirit, and the very nature of reality itself (Lapsley & Westlake, 1988: 9). This means that a film can never be an isolated entity and cannot theoretically be constructed outside of a viewing audience. Rama Venkataswamy in The Hybridity of Filmmaking in Australian National Cinema (1996) considers film to form a significant paradigm within a larger social system. Film hence enters into the realm of social processes, integrations, and interactions. From being a visual communicator, film can operate within the social fact of reality through its involvement in the representation of that reality.

Toby Miller in (How) Does Film Theory Work emphasises that the spectator is inherently involved in the social process of making sounds, images and signs stand for something (Miller, 1992: 192). Watching a film becomes a more hands on experience for audiences. The spectator is no more a passive receptacle, merely imbibing meaning as presented on screen, but engages in a succession of interpretations which are dependent on a whole set of background beliefs. These ‘background beliefs’ can be seen to conform to prevalent contemporary societal beliefs, or mythic discourses, during a period of time. The presence of these dominant societal beliefs operating as mythic discourses is a dimension this study will examine further.

The transparency and immediacy of the film image is thus related to the viewer and more specifically to viewer perception. “The sense that the visual and aural configurations of the film image are imprints of aspects of real objects affects how we take them and encourages us to identify them in the same way within the mind” (Whittock, 1990: 23). Film narratives for audiences perhaps fill up phenomenological lacunae in their texts of life and as such become fundamental in the process of concretisation of an idea. Patrick Fuery in New Developments in Film Theory describes these phenomenological lacunae and states that part of this process of active participation by the reader/spectator involves ‘concretisation’, which “is the

reader's necessary act of completing the text which is full of these indeterminate moments" (Fuery, 2000: 184-185).

Fuery discusses the cinematic gaze, and states that Metz himself continually reiterates the significance of film comprehension as directly related to the process of identification. Using the Lacanian analysis of the mirror stage, Metz theorises the self-reflexivity of the mirror stage as becoming the self-consciousness of the film spectator who tries to negotiate his own position in terms of the film and its meaning (Fuery, 2000: 185). Fuery explains that Lacan developed the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real stages as joined with the concepts of subjectivity, the unconscious and the social order; with the Imaginary stage emphasising the image as it forms a part of the self-reflexive instant of the subject. This allows Metz to make the conceptual leap that identification with the textual signifiers in the film by the spectator is actually a kind of self-identification.

Self-identification is an important conceptualisation for this thesis and is used by questioning how the self-identification of a predominantly white audience to an Aboriginal narrative can ever relate to the extent of which identification is possible. The film might encourage identification, but the reality of the outside world makes it nigh well impossible to accept.

### Chapter 4: The Notion of 'Truth'

Herein lies the question of truthful identifications and more significantly, truthful representations. Trinh T. Minh-Ha in Cotton and Iron talks of the adaptive nature of story telling and narration as ensuring that it is never a passive reflection of reality. For narrative to “unwind beautifully” it must always be truthful, because:

Truth is not attained through logo centric certainties (deriving from the tendency to identify human telos with rationality)...the boundaries of lie and truth are multiplied, reversed and displaced without rendering meaningless either the notion of lie or that of truth. Directly questioned, the story is also indirectly unquestionable in its truthfulness. (Minh-ha, 1990: 328)

Fictional narratives can highlight contradictions at the social level, and through them a discovery of the social ‘truth’ can be assuaged. The social truths to be discovered in narratives involving Aboriginal representations are more difficult to place. Fictional narratives, like myths, cannot analyse or solve problems (Said, 1978: 312). A film can never simply be used to explain the social problems at hand. Film has the ability to highlight social problems but not solve them.

Hence a filmic narrative can highlight Aboriginal identity representations, but cannot provide a decoding of the social ‘truth’ behind the Aboriginal representations. The telling of the story of the filmic narrative becomes for different audiences a diverse and distinctive visual experience. The audience relies on the storyteller, in this case the filmmaker, to summon the ‘truth’ and present it accordingly.

At this juncture there is a need to elucidate the difficulty involved in the definition of the notion of ‘truth’ itself. Expectations of an essential truth are reductionist. While it is inevitable that there is no such thing as objective ‘truth’ in cultural discourse, an attempt can nonetheless be made to represent it. Said suggests that analysis must focus on elements such as speech, narrative devices and so on, and not the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original (Said, 1978: 20-21).

The question on ‘truth’ is based primarily on the problem encountered when the filmmaker summons the truth to an audience, and chooses to portray the truth as he so pleases. Marcia Langton in Well I Heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television considers such a misplacement of subject/object, as a means to effortlessly position the Aboriginal as object and the person behind the camera as subject (Langton, 1993: 39). This misplacement can serve to mute the political and aesthetic critique of visual images and Aboriginal identity representations. The filmmaker can acquire a creative authority to represent Aboriginal ‘reality’ as legitimate, when in actual fact it always remains a mere fictionalisation (Langton, 1993: 40). In this way it is easy for the truth to be lost.

Langton considers representations of Aboriginal people as “figures of the imagination generated by Australian film producers. They are safe distant distortions of an actual world of people...” (Langton, 1993: 33). She elaborates on the notion of the ‘white gaze’ and contends that the representations of Aboriginal people by the non-Aboriginal can never be more than mere accounts.

In cinematic Aboriginal representation, the texts are already ‘tainted’ because non-Aboriginal people have produced them. Mishra states that both the viewers and the producers of these texts are primarily white who can be accused of representing Aboriginal people simply as “objects of knowledge” (Mishra, 1988: 178). Is it right then to assume that only a ‘native’ can make first order interpretations? Clifford Geertz in The Interpretation of Cultures emphasises that writings on another culture by outsiders are by definition only second and third order interpretations, as only a ‘native’ can make first order interpretations. “It’s his culture after all” (Geertz, 1975: 15).

However this notion that only ‘native’ people can make valid interpretations of their own culture cannot be automatically assumed. Instead, Langton advocates a participatory cinema and points out that by preventing non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal people and situations, the result will be hollow and empty representations. She believes that there is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make “better” representations of themselves, simply because being Aboriginal gives them a greater “understanding”. This belief is based on an ancient and

universal feature of racism: “the assumption of the undifferentiated ‘Other’. More specifically, the assumption that all Aboriginal people are “alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on” (Langton, 1993: 27). This belief in a homogenous Indigenous identity is certainly erroneous. As Vilsoni Hereniko in Representations of Cultural Identities asserts, Indigenous identity is “situationally variable” and in a process of continual reconstruction. The ‘Other’ is not a homogenous entity, but has a multitude of variables within it (Hereniko, 1999: 151).

Langton advocates the necessity of an intersubjective understanding of Aboriginality. She sums up her argument by stating, “Aboriginality only has meaning when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects” (Langton, 1993: 32). Lattas in Colonising the Other calls for a need to escape from the growing “interior landscape of nothingness”, (Lattas, 2000: 278) which makes representation meaningless unless placed within the context of interaction with other human beings.

## Chapter 5: Race and Aboriginality

The media operates as a signifying system. This thesis enquires into the various ways the media and particularly film signifies identity through definitions and constructions of race and Aboriginality. Alvarado, Gutch and Wollen in Learning the Media explain, “The media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be” (Alvarado et al, 1987: 200).

Stuart Hall in The Afterlife of Frantz Fanon reads race as “a discursive regime” rather than “a product of genetic or biological schema” (Hall, 1996: 20). He further states that it is important that the “enigmatic site of ‘the black body’ in the representation of radicalised difference, should not be mistaken for a return to a de-historicised, transcendental, biologically fixed, essentialised conception of racial identity” (Hall, 1996: 21). The inherent binaries in racial discourse are not given by nature and Frantz Fanon draws attention to this fact in Black Skin, White Masks (Fanon, 1967: 183).

Race is not a genetic but a social category. Racism is not a biological but a discursive regime. The so called bodily insignia...which appear to function as foundational, are not only constituted through and through in fantasy, but are really signifying elements in the discourse of racism. (Hall, 1996: 21)

This study will analyse if the ‘discursive regime’ of race can be applied to Aboriginality. Hodge and Mishra (1991) consider Aboriginality to be locked up in the mechanisms of suppression and displacement and consider it their task to “dismantle the discursive regimes that have hitherto been given the task of control” (Hodge & Mishra, 1991: 74). Hodge and Mishra’s (1991) and Hall’s (1996) use of the term ‘discursive regime’ is interesting. Juxtaposing their uses of the term would mean that the discursive regime of Aboriginality has been built up around a series of false dichotomies and forced choices, which have been imposed on Aboriginal people.

Discursive regimes are political and social facts which profoundly affect what is commonly said or communicated, and what is



recognised to be legitimate meaning...most white representations and constructions of Aborigines take place within terms of what is ultimately a single discursive regime, whose primary function is to sustain the foundation myth. (Hodge & Mishra, 1991: 26)

Thus Aboriginality as a cultural construction takes place at political, social and cultural levels which legitimatise white representations of Aboriginality, and ultimately also legitimatise the status quo.

Aboriginality as a social concept has also run the risk of turning into a kind of mystic realm, arising as Athol Chase in Empty Vessels and Loud Noises considered, from a romantic nostalgia “by those who see a museum or zoological value in having a ‘genuine’ Aboriginality available for inspection when the occasion suits” (Chase, 1981: 23). It becomes a way of making Aboriginality respond to white needs, rather than seeing it in its own terms. Jennings elaborates on this and considers that white Australian literature and cinema denies modern distinctive Aboriginal identity. Their preoccupation is with the traditional and the exotic, which ignores urban Aboriginal life (Jennings, 1993: 13).

Marcia Langton concisely states, “Aboriginality is a social thing” (Langton, 1993: 31). This goes back to Hall’s (1996) consideration of race as a social category. She further maintains that the resolution of who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue.

However as Robert Ariss in Writing Black points out, Aboriginal authors have attempted to rectify reflected images of their identity and have tried to “defy clichéd expressions of traditionality by espousing an adaptability and eclecticism” (Ariss, 1988: 133). For example, Marcia Langton in Urbanising Aborigines challenged the logic of terminology such as “full-blood-half caste dichotomy” and the “urban-rural-tribal triangle” (Langton, 1981: 17).

However in his book No Road, Stephen Muecke (1997) points out the limitations of even the more positive representations of Aboriginality that circulate in Australia. These images consider Aboriginality as the human and spiritual complement to the more productive but soulless and dehumanising white world. Unfortunately this is

still a way of valuing the traditional and the tribal and not those aspects of Aboriginal culture that have adapted to invasion and changed over the period of colonisation.

Preoccupations with the so-called 'primitive' and exotic world of Indigenous Australians in opposition to the urban 'civilised' non-Indigenous is examined in greater detail in the individual analysis of films later in this thesis. The character oppositions of stereotyping Indigenous identity in primitive/civilised, us/them, self/'Other', rural/urban dualisms is analysed semiotically in the film texts.

At this point there is also a need to quickly identify the shifting definitions and perceptions of Aboriginality, which as Stephen Muecke points out in Narrative and Intervention in Aboriginal Filmmaking and Policy, present subjectivities in the form of visual narratives and texts and visual images of what non-Aboriginal Australians equate with the Aboriginal 'Other'. The central debate thus becomes the representation of this Aboriginal otherness (Muecke, 1994: 249).

Fanon insists that "the Negro (sic) has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself...For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 1967: 110). The problem is not really the existence of the white man in colonialism, but the fact that blackness as a category can exist only in relation to an opposed whiteness. "The black man can only exist in relation to himself through the alienating presence of the white 'Other'" (Hall, 1996: 18). This existence of the 'black self' can be represented in film. Homi K. Bhabha in The Other Question observes that film can provide a way in to excavating the "mode of representation of otherness" (Bhabha, 1983: 304).

Ultimately to speak about Aboriginality today is to enter into the intricacy of what Michael Dodson in The End in the Beginning called:

...a labyrinth full of obscure passages, ambiguous signs and trapdoors. The moment the question is asked, 'Who or what is Aboriginal?' an historical landscape is entered, full of absolute and timeless truths, which have been set in place by self professed experts and authorities all too ready to tell us, and the world, the meaning of Aboriginality. (Dodson, 2003: 28)

## **Chapter 6: Questions on Identity**

This thesis also puts to question the whole concept of identity. The notion of identity itself is in a continual process of formulation and reformulation. Etienne Balibar in Culture and Identity considers that in actuality there are no identities as such and that there are only identifications. Thus for Balibar “identities are only the ideal goal of processes of identification, their point of honour, of certainty or uncertainty of their consciousness, thus their imaginary referent” (Balibar, 1995: 187). Every identity is affirmed as a function of the ‘Other’ in response and relation to the threat of annihilation.

Identities for Balibar are a processing of the imaginary, a history of the subject in relation to the imaginary ‘Other’ and a final culmination in the identification with a colossal ‘we’. Hence identity is not necessarily a psychological introspection into the nature of the self. Rather it is an explicit understanding of how that self is perceived through identification with other subjects. That this identification can present a paradox of non-belonging is linked in part to the shaping of multiple identities. It is impossible to talk of identities in singularity. Identities translate from one to the other. In fact the idea of distinctive, compartmentalised identities presents a fault in the text.

Hall in Questions of Cultural Difference states that identities are not static, stable, essentialist concepts, but strategic and positional ones. Such an understanding of identities can serve to rectify the falsity of isolated identities. Identity is always in a process of change and reconstruction and is never singular but multiplies “across different, often intersecting, and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions” (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 3-4).

Identity encapsulates the resources of history, language and culture and how these resources are used in the process of becoming. The reiteration of tradition, history and culture in no way undermines belongingness. In fact, their continual recurrence helps subjects to come to terms with themselves and in doing so helps them to express their identity.

Hall goes on to argue that in actual fact identities are, “not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we come from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation” (Hall & Du Gay, 1996: 4). Identity and representation hence become intertwined. This thesis will examine the interplay of Aboriginal identity and representation through an analysis of their operation within film texts.

With this logic, representation would become a core concept in the reflection of the self. This recognition that identity is inseparable from representation easily admits the rendering of that representation to be usurped, leading into the cultural hegemony expressed by Marx and reiterated by Said in Orientalism Reconsidered that “they [the ‘Other’] cannot represent themselves; they must [therefore] be represented” (Said, 1985: 7). Whether this ‘construction of identity’ operates in Australian cinema is a question further investigated in this thesis.

Michael Dodson illustrates the effects of identity representations on Aboriginal people:

Our experiences of ourselves, and of our Aboriginality, have been transformed by the representations. It may be the case that the dominant representations of Aboriginality have reduced it to a relational concept. It may also be the case that Indigenous peoples constantly feel the gaze of the other and have internalised that gaze. (Dodson, 2003: 28)

This is a compelling point in itself. The internalisation of an alien interpretation of personal identity can have devastating effects for Aboriginal people. However Dodson goes on to say that this does not mean that Aboriginality is experienced only as a relation to non-Aboriginality, or through imposed representations of it. “We have never forgotten that we have an identity that cannot be reduced to a relation, and cannot be destroyed by misconception” (Dodson, 2003: 28).

The next part puts under scrutiny the reductions of Aboriginal identity by the dominant culture and its operation through film texts. This is achieved through an

explanation of semiotic methodological and analytical inquiry. It will highlight syntagmatic relations, connotations within film texts, dualisms, and present a model of the relations between individual films and the cinema system.

## **PART II**

### **CINEMA AND SEMIOTICS: METHODOLOGY**

*The cinema is not a language system, because it contradicts three important characteristics of the linguistic fact: a language is a system of signs used for intercommunication. Now, like all the arts, and because it is itself an art, cinema is one-way communication.*

(Metz, 1974 a: 75)

*Cinematic narrative assaults the audience with impressions; it raises and casts off metaphors so rapidly that the conscious mind can barely perceive them; it affects us like some agile yet penetrating notation.*

(Rhode, 1976: 41)

Landmark studies on Indigenous representation in Australian film tend to bring together various perspectives and theoretical works on representation and analysis of Aboriginality. These studies focus on Aboriginal cultural representations in film traced through the historical emergence of various discursive formations in the filmic representations of Aboriginal people (Moore & Muecke, 1984). Specific complexities of Australian filmic discourses, acting as sites of racial and sexual differences have been explored in previous film studies. These include a study of the films which do not acknowledge the ways in which class and gender interact with race (Jennings, 1993). Aboriginality and questions on race and perspectives on intersubjectivity and the notion of truth (Langton, 1993) have also been examined.

Previous studies also focussed on providing a comprehensive guide to Australian film production and the representation of Indigenous characters within them (Pike, 1977; Pike & Cooper, 1981; Malone 1988). An attempt was made through these studies to trace the history of attitudes expressed in Australian films in terms of what was being presented and how it was presented.

These studies inform this thesis on the changing and often unchanging attitudes of non-Aboriginal Australians towards Aboriginal Australia confined to feature films. They provide the critical theoretical backdrop needed to interpret cinematic representations of Aboriginal identity and the way it has been dealt with in studies in the past. These studies however, do not examine specific film texts and their inextricable link to signification and the construction of meaning of the imagery that race carries for an audience. The manifest message of the cinema and its links to identity representation is left unexamined in these key texts. This is where this thesis links to and differs from previous studies in this field of inquiry.

In examining film narratives, this thesis specifically employs a semiotic analysis of film. It recognises the existence of relations among classical film theory (1930-1950), modern film theory, the cognitivists and the cognitive film semioticians (as detailed in Appendix 2) but follows the *précis* that film is a place for and of signification. This thesis necessarily engages with a semiotics of representation within filmic identity. The 'identity' studied here is the images of Indigenous identity and the myriad of ways it has been represented on screen.

The employment of semiotic applications for this thesis presupposes the way sign systems are used and incorporated into a culture. Social practices in a culture always signify. The fact that there is no such thing as meaning independent of the ideological or political structures in which it is articulated, forms the basis of the research undertaken in this thesis. Indigenous identity is juxtaposed with semiotic analysis because films have the potential to carry meaning. Australian films, located within a specific culture, that of 'mainstream' Australia, express and support the evident social organisation of that culture.



## **Chapter 7: Fundamentals of Cinematic Semiotic Analysis**

Firstly, a working definition of semiotics as conceptually used in this study needs to be outlined. Why is the employment of semiotic concepts necessary in analysing film narratives specific to this thesis? Semiology in general is the science of meaning. As an all-embracing theory of human communication, semiotics places the human being as a mediator in relation to his environment. The semiotics of film does not consider 'film' to be a pre-given entity, but reflects on its very existence. It does this while trying to understand the consequences film has on culture and society (Buckland, 2000: 5).

The question fundamental to semiotics is the way values of a culture or sub-culture are incorporated into the sign systems present within it. These sign systems might be taken for granted. Nonetheless they are structured and symbolic. For a semiotician, the objects in the environment, gestures, interactions, and words derive their meanings from the sign systems to which they belong. These systems are not given or natural, but are a development of culture, thus implying that they carry cultural meanings and values. This is an engaging point for a study on identity representation because semiotics studies social practices and the way that they signify.

A semiotics of film relies on film texts acting as a place for signification. If everything in social life has the potential to mean, then this thesis uses the semiotic perspective to understand how film texts, when located within a specific culture, can express and support the social organisation of this culture. There is no such thing as meaning which is independent of the ideological and political structures in which it is articulated. Evidencing little or a total lack of articulated Indigenous representation in Australian cinema signifies a representation on screen which is expressive of the ideological and political structures of the historical time periods in which the films are produced. This is studied further in the next chapter through an individual analysis of four film texts.

The employment of semiotic applications brings forward questions on the differences between the words and images. Images operate without any recourse to verbal or written information which may or may not accompany them. For the perceivers of

these images, namely film audiences, the understanding of these meanings present an intricate and complicated system of decoding. This involves not only the physical act of seeing, but also the way in which reality is represented and organised on screen. Hence the semiotics located within this thesis, is one of identity representation found within the images communicated to an audience.

Before outlining the methods used in the questioning and reasoning behind the analysis in this thesis, the subject of signification must be dealt with. Can film narratives be subsumed under a general theory of signification? Semiotics challenges the understanding of film as a mere form of entertainment. Instead it maintains that film is a system of signification, which articulates experience. A signifying system is a wide concept and encompasses any organised and structured set of signs which carry cultural meanings (Barry, 1995: 47). Hence it becomes a relevant framework in the examination of films because the more complex a society becomes, the more it relies upon systems of signification to simplify, organise and structure experience (Buckland, 2000: 6). Film semioticians propose to construct a comprehensive model to explain how a film embodies meaning or signifies it to an audience and to uncover the particular patterns of signification, which give films their special characteristics (Andrew, 1976: 217). So what exactly forms the core of examination of a film and where does semiotics begin to look for signification in a film?

Film as an art form and as a means of communication has specific materials of expression, which mark it from other systems of signification, such as language. Since the earliest days of film theory the question of how images can be understood to carry meaning has been asked in relation to verbal language, which is a better-understood system of signification. How can filmic images, which are only reproductions and representations of reality, form a meaningful statement of reality? Semiotics essentially understands “images of the world as speech about the world” (Nichols, 1985: 259).

Simply considered, “the semiotics of the cinema, like the study of all systems of signification, takes its departure directly from linguistics” (Andrew, 1976: 219). However, rather than defining film as a language like all other literary languages,

film semioticians suggest that it uses certain codes and signs in order to constitute a structure or a grammar.

On this point Metzian semiology contributes extensively to this thesis. Metz began his career by posing the question of the ways and to what extent the cinema is like or unlike verbal language. In order to justify film as a language, the perception of language had to be redefined. Firstly, he differentiated between language and a 'language system'. For Metz, any form of communication was a language, but Danish, English, or Spanish for example, were 'language systems' (Monaco, 1982: 157). Therefore, the cinema was a language but not a language system. Consequently this thesis looks at the 'cinema' as a language, as a visual communication of inherent message meanings. It treats the entire 'cinema system' as a distinctive 'language system' constituted by the genres present within it. This is further explicated in the latter part of the chapter through the diagrammatically presented cinematic model and discussion on codes.

Metz considers that "it is not because the cinema is a language that it can tell us such fine stories, but rather it has become a language because it has told such fine stories." (Metz, 1974: 47) Signification in film did not look at all like verbal language, either at the level of its function or use. For Metz, it was the signification itself, which was of foremost concern because "signification is a different thing altogether from the material through which it appears" (Andrew, 1976: 219). Metz posited on the raw materials of the cinema, the channels of information which viewers pay attention to, such as images, recorded speech, recorded music, and sound effects. He stated clearly that this raw material was in no way reality itself. It was only a 'cinematographic fact' from where to begin looking for signification.

A brief definition of these terms is necessary at this point. Signification is the relationship between the signifier and signified. A sign for Saussure is composed of the dual elements of a 'signifier' and 'signified'. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (Saussure, 1974: 67). A signifier is the form the sign takes while the signified is the concept it represents. A sign must have both a signifier and a signified. A meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified cannot exist (Saussure, 1974: 102-103).

In film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical... The power of language systems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not. (Monaco, 1982: 127-128)

This is an important part of what Metz was referring to in his description of the cinematic signifier as ‘the imaginary signifier’. Film suggests less of an obvious gap between the signifier and its signified because it is less reliant than words on symbolic signs. This can make films seem to offer ‘reflections of reality’.

The Saussurean conception of language also looked at the arbitrariness of verbal language. He argued that the affinity between any signifier and its signified was remote. Signification in language was also arbitrary. Language hence constituted our world and not just recorded or labelled it. Meaning is always attributed to the object or thing by the human mind, but constructed and expressed through language (Barry, 1995: 43). It also has the power of ‘double articulation’ where the user of a language operates at two levels; comprehending the functions of sounds (phonemes) and meaning (monemes). This power does not belong to the cinema because:

Cinema’s signifiers are just too closely tied to their signifieds: images are realistic representations and sounds are exact reproductions of what they refer to. One cannot break up the signifiers of film without dismembering their signifieds at the same time. (Andrew, 1976: 220)

The cinema works with shots of a constructed reality and does not use anything similar to a linguistic phoneme.

Instead, film is made up of a series of minimal sequences called syntagmas. These might be a series of different views of a house for example, which “might constitute what Metz calls a ‘descriptive syntagma’– showing what the house is like and not presenting an event unfolding in time” (Braudy, 1998: 92). In this way syntagmas are recognized on the basis of montage and how this montage is put together. In language phonemes and morphemes are combined to create sentences, in cinema image and sound are combined to create syntagmas (Stam, 2000: 115). By moving from one image to another film ‘speaks’ to the viewers and it communicates. Metz

states that no image resembles another image but most narrative films resemble one another in their structures.

Metz did suggest that montage can be seen as a kind of filmic articulation, an articulation of the reality being depicted on screen. However it is not one in strictly the same sense as linguistic articulation. Film has nothing comparable to the smallest units of language. At best, it is more like a series of sentences. This led Metz to make the distinction between the cinematic shot and the linguistic word (See Appendix 3). Even a single shot of an inanimate object is an assertion of that particular type of thing.

The cinema does not present a language that is available as a predetermined syntax, because the ability to create cinematic utterances relies on talent and training (Stam, 2000: 111). “When a ‘language’ does not already exist, one must be something of an artist to speak it, however poorly. For to speak it is partly to invent it, whereas to speak the language of everyday is simply to use it” (Monaco, 1981: 163). In using language, one can imagine and create variable visual images, whereas in the cinema images have already been created and chosen for you.

Thus the language of the cinema is “an artistic language, a discourse or signifying practice characterised by specific codifications and ordering procedures” (Stam, 2000: 112). If the cinema is ruled by certain codes then the question of a grammar of film arises. Film is ‘like a language’ in its use of filmic codes. However, it is also virtually impossible to be ungrammatical in the cinema.

In fact, the cinema can hardly even lay claim to a grammar or codes. As Messaris considers:

... the viewer’s interpretation of edited sequences is largely a matter of cross-referencing possible interpretations against a broader context... rather than a matter of decoding formal devices. To put this more compactly: Interpretation is driven by the narrative context, not the code. (Messaris, 1994: 79)

Audiences are unable to tell an ungrammatical film construction from a grammatical one, and would never think of correcting a film-maker for incorrect syntax or for the wrong choice of images (Andrew, 1976: 221). Therefore, what a film-maker (re) presents on the screen might be taken as it is-- unquestioned by the viewer, due to the lack of an underlying syntax. The cinematic signifier can be made to represent images of what is absent, which in the context of this thesis is the way Aboriginal representation might be manipulated.

Interpretation in the cinema is not suggested, it is stated to a silent spectator through presented visual images. Ultimately, the cinema seems more like a “place of signification rather than a means of it” (Andrew, 1976: 223). The cinema as a play of absence and presence is linked to the analysis of Indigenous representation in Australian films, thus linking the theory discussed here to the analysis of films in the next part of this thesis. The images presented on screen are not constitutive of a code in the usual sense. However certain filmic codes do operate in the cinema, as further elaborated in Chapter 9. At this point what is pointed out is that viewer interpretation of the image does not depend solely upon a code or cinematic syntax.

## Chapter 8: Syntagmatic Relations

A fundamental insight into the language system by Saussure was the active relationship between signs. Saussure considered that “normally we do not express ourselves by using single linguistic signs, but groups of signs, organised in complexes which themselves are signs.” (Saussure, 1974: 128) 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.

Also the use of one syntagmatic relation over another influences its meaning. In film, narrative relationships are based not only on *sequential* relations (a film sequence) but also on *spatial* (montage working through juxtaposition of shots) and *conceptual* relations (exposition or argument). Conceptual relations in cinema are more difficult to place than in language texts and are not clear-cut (Brooks & Warren, 1972: 44). This is because visual images are not suited to exposition (Pierce, 1937: 291; Gombrich, 1982: 138-175). For the structure of analysis in this thesis, only *sequential* and *spatial* relations will be defined and used. Syntagms are often purely described as sequential or temporal chains (before and after). But spatial relations are also syntagmatic and can include left/right, top/bottom, centre/margin (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

Sequential syntagmas are often noted as narratives. Semiotic inquiry tends to focus on minimal narrative units and the grammar of the plot. Metz observed, “A narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world” (Metz, 1974 *a*: 17). Hence, the meaning articulated in a filmic narrative follows a basic narrative syntagm, which is a linear chain of events corresponding to the beginning, middle, and end of a story. This is the basic formula for films where storylines are given precedence over everything else. “Narratives reduce the unique or the unusual to familiar and regular patterns of expectation” (Tolson, 1996: 43). This basic formula in films provides structure, coherence and schemas for everyday life. Such a positing on the basic formula within a filmic narrative is used to inform this thesis on the function of narrative structures. More importantly it provides insight into narrative closures which operate within the film

texts chosen for analysis and how this reduces representations of Indigenous identity in Australian cinema to familiar patterns of expectations.

Sequential syntagmas in the filmic narrative do not, however, qualify 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, no matter how ‘realistic’, is always a *representation* rather than a simple recording or reproduction of reality.

The use of familiar narrative structures in film serves “to naturalize the content of the narrative itself” (Hodge & 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 (Hodge & Kress, 1988: 230) in its qualifying of reality as a referential correspondence for the audience. Films produce for audiences a construction of reality, which seemingly reduces the unique or unfamiliar to regular patterns of expectations (Tolson, 1996: 43). Hence representations of Indigenous 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.

This argument of the reducibility of narrative closures is further analysed in this thesis in the next part by analysis of four film texts. A classic example of the operation of familiar patterns of expectations looked at in detail in the following chapter operates within the film text of *Jedda*. The two central characters of *Jedda*



and Marbuk at the end of Chauvel's *Jedda* are eliminated, and it seems so will their 'inferior race' ultimately die out because of the inherent asserted moral and genetic weaknesses of Aboriginal people (Langton, 1993: 48). This merely echoes the sentiments widespread in the Australia of the 1950s at the height of Assimilationist policies, reducing the representations of Jedda and Marbuk to merely elements of a statement on the power of filmic narrative closures.

The following sections underline semiotic inquiry into the area of representation. Denotation and Connotation highlights two levels of representation in film texts. Myths and Absent Signifiers elucidate structural compositions within narratives. Lastly Decoding and Audiences looks at the reception of filmic texts.

### 1. Denotation and Connotation

The next section of theoretical enquiry focuses on a study of the semiotic concepts of denotations and connotations, analysed specifically at their operation within the filmic narratives used for this thesis. A vital aspect of semiotic analysis of filmic narratives is a study on the relationship between the signifier and signified and the analytic distinction between the denotative signified and connotative signified. This is because meaning, which is the relationship between the signifier and its signified, includes both denotation and connotation. The analytic distinction between the denotative signified and the connotative signified ascribes meaning to images.

In looking at denotation and connotation in film narratives, this thesis offers an extension of the Barthesian concept of 'layering of meaning'. Denotation forms the first layer of meaning on which is superimposed the connotative layer. No sign can be purely denotative, or functionally lacking in meaning, because specific connotators load a sign with multiple meanings. Connotations themselves operate at various levels through the 'language' of the cinema. Breaking this language down to composite elements in order to analyse certain visual representations is attempted in the next section of this chapter where a brief illustration model is presented to explain the operation of various overlapping traits in the cinema.

Denotation is largely unproblematic, because it is the literal, definitional, or apparent meaning of a sign. Barthian visual semiotics centres on the idea of the layering of meaning, or levels of representation, where denotation forms the first level of who or what is being depicted. Denotation constitutes the act of recognising who or what kind of person or thing is being represented. Yet the viewer can recognise only what exists in his knowledge. Denotation can therefore exclude those viewers who do not have that knowledge. Barthes recognised this fact and stated that the denotative layer corresponds as it were “to the letter of the image, and we can all agree to call it the literal message, as opposed to the symbolic message” (Barthes, 1977: 36).

For function of analysis, this thesis will look at specific denotations of Indigenous identity representation within the four film texts chosen for analysis. Hence, the ‘who or what is being represented’ in this thesis is looked at in the sense of ‘who’ and ‘what’ kind of Indigenous identity is being presented to audiences on screen. This thesis will also include analysis at the level of audiences, because viewers at varying levels of generality perceive varying images, depending on the context of these images. Since a recreation of audiences at various time-periods is virtually impossible, a large part of the material used to gauge the plausible levels of generality for Australian audiences at each time period will be done through a survey of the critical responses to the film at the time. This thesis does not attempt a specific audience analysis. Decoding the message conveyed through cinema articulation by audiences will form an addendum to the thesis rather than a major portion of it. In the next chapter, when analysing four film texts, a tendency to describe the ‘Other’ for an ‘us’ is located within seemingly plausible levels of generality for Australian audiences.

In this context, stereotypes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are analysed and what is studied in detail in the analysis is the ‘typing’ of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity and how this takes place through the denotation of physical or cultural attributes of characters on screen. Stereotypical representations can exaggerate or make prominent only certain features, so that the person or event being depicted is represented as a ‘type’ rather than as an individual person. Thus Indigenous identity on screen can be typified through visual denotation, whilst not even having moved into the realm of connotation.

Visual denotation can easily move into the realm of connotation, or the complex of meaning which is attributed to a simple denotation. As Barthes considers:

Denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature. (Barthes, 1974: 9)

Connotation can produce the illusion of denotation, i.e., the signifier and signified as being identical. This is because in practice, meanings are very difficult to separate neatly from each other. No sign can be purely denotative or lacking connotation because “referential meaning is moulded by evaluation...meaning is always permeated with value judgement” (Voloshinov, 1973: 105). A neutral objective description free of evaluative elements is impossible to achieve.

Connotation as the second layer of meaning, or level of representation, centres on the basic idea that the denotative meaning established for the represented operates through specific connotators which load it with multiple meanings. Thus a denotative sign can lead to a chain of connotations, or the signifier can be attached to several additional signified. This naturally depends on the level at which investigation takes place. It becomes essential to remember that “what is a signifier or a signified depends entirely on the level at which the analysis operates: a signified on one level can become a signifier on another level” (Willemsen, 1994: 105). This is how a sign can signify one thing, and is loaded with multiple meanings at the same time, or generating different connotations for audiences. Thus a simple depiction of an Aboriginal character within a shot, a montage or even *misé-en-scène* within a shot can be analysed in terms of the composite meanings it generates for an audience.

Connotations do not relate solely to paradigmatic relations but generate syntagmatic relations as well. However, for this thesis, it is not sufficient to confine connotation to paradigms and syntagms alone. Connotations of a signifier relate to other signifiers, even absent signifiers which can be associated with it, within the text of a film. They are influenced not only by socio-cultural variables, but also by historical

factors and change over a period of time. They are framed within the dominant and authoritative discourses and codes of their time. There is a perilous tendency to accept denotations as self-evident truths. This thesis tries to highlight such predispositions, especially in Indigenous identity representations, through an explanation of the ability of semiotic analysis to highlight these.

## 2. Myths and Absent Signifiers

Connotations of a signifier relate to other signifiers and cannot be taken as a separate whole. They are analysed in this thesis in association with absent signifiers within the film text, depending on their use. Connotations of absent signifiers are influenced not only by socio cultural variables, but also by historical and political factors and are framed by the dominant and authoritative discourses within it, which can change over a period of time.

For Roland Barthes, individual items were contextualised by structure and in this process of contextualisation layers of signification were revealed. The second layer of signification, that of connotation, he referred to as ‘myths’. Myths were connotative meanings which condensed everything associated with them into a single entity and also functioned as ideological meanings to legitimate the status quo and the interests of those in power (Van Leeuwen, 2002: 97). Signs and codes are generated by myths and these in turn serve to maintain them. Myths “operate to produce from the complexity of historical events a manageable series of incidents in narrative form” (Molloy, 1990: 1). Myths organise shared ways of conceptualising and understanding something within a culture.

The relationship between nature and culture is seen as arbitrary which allow myths to perform indispensable functions to express, augment, and codify belief. Myths serve the function of naturalisation (Barthes, 1977: 45) and naturalise culture so that dominant cultural and historical attitudes, values and beliefs seem natural, timeless, and self evident. This ‘natural’ culture confers privilege and power and serves the ideological interests of those in power, or the dominant culture.

The function of myth is to transform culture into nature, through its capacity to transform history into nature (Barthes, 1970: 129). The operation of the media steeps everyday life in an “anonymous ideology” (Barthes, 1970: 112) presenting culturally derived social institutions and behavioural norms as “evident laws of the natural order” and a manifestation of “common sense” (Barthes, 1970: 150). This thesis attempts to further analyse the development of culturally derived social institutions in Australia and their operation at the behavioural level of film viewers, who might, through the rhetoric of myth, confirm what is presented to them on screen about Indigenous identity as natural or social reality.

The understanding of myth as a dominant discourse, can lend itself to be used as ‘ideology’. While myth and ideology cannot be used interchangeably, they do intersect and are not necessarily separate. Ideology also tends to promote the values and interests of the dominant culture. As Eagleton postulates:

A dominant power may legitimate itself by promoting beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalising* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable...and obscuring social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such ‘mystification’, as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions. (Eagleton, 1991: 5-6)

Hence, common to both myth and ideology is the notion of a socially constructed reality, taken as normal or ‘natural’. Culture is itself a signifying system, and marks cultural hegemony as “a whole body of practises and expectations constituting a sense of reality for most people” (Williams, 1973: 8). This reinforces the questioning in this thesis, which will focus on deconstructing the ways in which certain attitudes, values and beliefs about Indigenous identity are supported, while others are suppressed, within the film texts and genres chosen for analysis. It is a critical element in the establishment of systems of meaning within Australian films analysed in this thesis.

The fact that dominant discourses have the power to legitimate themselves by promoting, naturalising and universalising values and beliefs, renders them as self-evident truths. Such 'mystification' forms a network of a-priori assumptions which intersect in the establishment of cultural hegemony. How this cultural hegemony is evidenced in Australian cinema is studied through an explication of the connection of each film to the policies and dominant discourses of each era. The representations of Indigenous identity within each film narrative will be compared with the socio-political and historical situation existent at the time. This will serve to extract Indigenous identity representation as a holistic entity within social perceptions of the time period.

The establishment of systems of meaning within Australian films containing Indigenous identity representation is analysed through the establishment of 'mythic' elements and the construction of a markedly different social reality. If myth and ideology are linked through their common concern with the construction of a social reality, then myth and film are linked through characteristics of their narratives (Molloy, 1990: 6). This applies in particular to 'primitive myths', which are transmitted through speech and have non-literate roots. Films are similarly transmitted through image and soundtrack, which have led to connections being made between genres and myths.

For Levi-Strauss, universal human truths or myths existed at the level of structure. All signifying systems, like all systems of cultural organization, shared the same fundamental structures regardless of their particular content.

A compilation of known tales and myths would fill an imposing number of volumes. But they can be reduced to a small number of simple types if we abstract from among the diversity of characters a few elementary functions. (Levi-Strauss, 1972: 203-204)

Myths made sense only when seen as part of a system. Levi-Strauss also insisted that the relations among units within the system occur in binary pairs, which are either similar to each other or different from each other. This corresponds to Saussure's idea of paradigms where one thing is exchanged for something similar, and syntagms, where one thing is exchanged for something different. These are

relations of paradigmatic opposition. 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: 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 signifieds are accorded differing values.

The existence of binary oppositions within myths operating at the level of structure pervades all signifying systems. Film is one such signifying system. This means that binary oppositions permeate filmic narratives where the patterning of textual elements in films centred on plot, structure, character, situations and imagery can be paired in opposed units. Thus dualisms can exist in film narratives as well.

Applied to filmic narratives, basic oppositions present in genres have been the basis of further study in the area. Film genres, such as the Hollywood Western (Kitses, 1970; Wright, 1975; Schatz, 1977) rely on the creation of character types in opposition that are fundamental to social consciousness. These include wilderness/civilization, individual/community, nature/culture, law/gun, sheep/cattle and others. This binarism is applied in this thesis to question the ‘self’ of non-Indigenous identity as seen in relation to a contrasted ‘Other’ of Indigenous identity representation. Examples of this binarism include various filmic representations of Aboriginal affinity with ‘nature’ as opposed to the ‘city life’ of non-Aboriginal culture (Moore & Muecke, 1984) or the construction of Aboriginal characters as ‘primitive’ in opposition to ‘civilised’ (Hodge, 1990). Such themes will be explored in their paired binary oppositions in the analysis of films in the next chapter.

The oppositional logic of binarism also demonstrates that neither of the paired terms can be understood without the other. If the two signifieds are accorded different values, then there is a tendency to indicate one as marked and the other as unmarked according to the differing values to which they are ascribed. The unmarked term is primary, whilst the marked term is secondary, suppressed or even excluded as an 'absent signifier'. The unmarked term is not merely neutral but implicitly positive. This is in direct contrast to the negative connotations of the marked term. The most common order of paired terms usually distinguishes the first as a semantically positive term and the second as a negative one (Lyons, 1977: 276). Ironically, it is the absent signifier that defines the unmarked term.

This is worthy of note for this thesis' analysis of Indigenous identity representations. Non-Aboriginality is the typical dominant unmarked form of filmic representation, incurring an invisible status. Unmarked terms are not simply a structural feature of semiotic systems, but rather reflect the naturalisation of dominant cultural values. "It is through the marking out of... differences that social order is produced and maintained" (Woodward, 1997: 33). The deviance of the marked form of Aboriginality, on the other hand, is salient. In Australian films where it is not totally excluded, this marked form is highlighted and presented as different or out of the ordinary.

The analysis of Indigenous identity in this thesis will study the grades of Aboriginality marked in filmic representations in relation to an unmarked, natural and often positive non-Aboriginality. In some cases non-Aboriginality is the typical dominant unmarked form of representation, drawing no attention to its inherent invisible status. The 'deviance' of the marked form of Aboriginality is salient in films where if not totally excluded is at least presented as different or out of the ordinary. Aboriginal characters are often accorded a marked form of representation, said to 'make a statement' on their race. They are marked by their tendency to deviate from conventional expectations or normative non-Aboriginality. In some ways marked Aboriginal characters are represented as fulfilling conventional expectations, and are reduced to those expectations.



In looking at the ‘generic qualities’ of films with Indigenous identity representation, the marked form of Aboriginality operates within them, to often reinforce romanticised, if not racist, clichés of Aboriginal identity. There is no doubt that films with little explicit racism on Indigenous identity representation have been made with success in Australia (Jennings, 1993; Langton, 1993; Peters-Little, 2003). However the fine line that exists between racist and romantic representations (Muecke, 1982 and 1992) of Indigenous identity is explored through the marking of Aboriginality in the four films chosen for analysis. It will be examined if Aboriginality is marked in these films by its tendency to deviate from ‘conventional’ expectations. The reality of these ‘conventional’ expectations remaining unmarked, as a reflection on the naturalisation of dominant cultural values accorded to non-Aboriginality, will also be put under scrutiny.

### 3. Decoding and Audiences

While film semiotics tend to focus on the internal structure of the film text, it is essential at this juncture to further examine the process involved in its interpretation as well, leading to a discussion on decoding and audiences. The most fundamental task of interpretation involves the understanding of what a sign represents in the film, namely its denotation. This requires a comprehension of the representational codes present within the film text. This is extracted from the filmic text by an audience. The film viewer however, for the most part, remains an unknown entity (Helman, 1989).

Decoding of a film text by a viewer is regarded as closer to a form of construction rather than mere reception. This is because reception suggests passivity (Corner, 1983: 266). Viewers as decoders of visual images form a neglected aspect of film research with many film theorists (Austin, 1983; Stacey, 1994; Barker, 1998) stressing the scarcity of audience studies.

This thesis does not delve deeply into the realm of ethnographic audience research, but only goes so far as to question how identity representation is an intricate element in the viewing of a film. Metz’s workings on the theory of enunciation initially provide a theoretical framework for the notion that any visual representation implies

a subject (Buckland, 2000: 2). However, this subject was reduced from the concrete psychophysical being, to a set of textually constructed subjects, which makes these beings receivers of filmic images. For Metz, the viewer was not some concrete person going to a cinema but only a certain part of the person entering it, a psychic apparatus required by the “cinematographic institution in order that it may function properly” (Vernet and Percheron, 1975: 718).

The viewer in early film semiology was given no concrete role in the filmic process, despite the awareness that it was the viewer who ‘makes a film’. In fact in the development of semiotic theory, the problem of the viewer and the author did not exist. Film semiotics was a study of an impersonal system, with syntactic issues of being of prominent concern. The viewer’s primary function was to decode the complex arrangement of messages presented to him on screen. This ‘subject positioning’ of the viewer provided little insight into film as a function of its social context. This has led latter film semiology to consider the filmic text or narration as the product of the viewer as well (Branigan, 1984: 12-13).

This thesis locates audiences in terms of the social contexts they bring with them to a particular film they see.

If the formal devices, as semiologists put it, ‘inscribe’ the spectator in the text, film semiotics has also identified-under such different labels as the filmic enunciation [Casetti], ‘the communicative contract’ [Odin, Jost] - the way the spectator inscribes a text in his/her systems of knowledge, belief, symbolic action and social practice. (Buckland, 2000: 8)

The interpretation of a film by an audience is defined by the set of rules and conventions viewers bring with them. This becomes a significant point of analysis for this thesis which analyses the conventions a predominantly white audience bring with them to view Indigenous identity representations.

## Chapter 9: Grande Syntagmatique Revisited

In analysing specific filmic narratives and the meanings implied within them, this thesis presents a visual model of the juxtaposition of the paradigms of cinema system, individual films, montage and individual shots. It is a model of the cinema system (*langue*), which encompasses individual films (*parole*) and the smaller units of montage (sequence of shots) and individual shots. The cinema system as defined here is not akin to that defined by Metz. Metz considered the specific underlying system of film as cinematic language, in opposition to individual films. His first model was the 'Grande Syntagmatique' (Metz, 1974 *a*: Chapter 4). His second model attempted to define filmic specificity in terms of specific combinations of the five overlapping traits of iconicity, mechanical duplication, multiplicity, movement and mechanically produced multiple moving images (Metz, 1974 *b*: Chapter 10). The visual model developed here uses the basic assumptions of Metz's approach, but defines them in a manner so as to correspond to this thesis' aim of providing insight into visual representations of varying levels of Aboriginal identity representation.

Individual film narratives with representations of Indigenous identity within them are chosen as the first starting point for methodological inquiry. The next consideration is the study of these films' amalgamation to the cinema system. The individual films (*parole*) are encompassed within a more general cinematic system (*langue*). Simply put, if the cinema system lends structure to and is generated by the individual films it encompasses, then the two exist in symbiosis. The operation of the cinema system for this thesis is concentrated on genre studies. Genres follow the fundamental textual system of being organised into and by codes and sub-codes, which reflect values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the Australian cultural system towards Indigenous identity representation on screen. The following methodological discussion forms the theoretical backdrop to the analysis of films, as discussed in the latter part of the thesis.

1. To begin with, before presenting the visual model developed for analysis, it is necessary to identify the initial concepts applied in the model.
2. Next, a visual construct of the model is presented.
3. Thirdly, an explanation of the terms used in the model is undertaken, and
4. Lastly, how these terms work together in the analysis is explored.

## 1. Identification of Initial Concepts: Codes

Studying film through a semiotic perspective begins with studying its specificity. This specificity is defined “in terms of the invariant traits manifest in all films, the traits that confer upon films its distinctiveness, which determines its unique means of articulating and mediating experience” (Buckland, 2000: 6). Specificity is defined by Metz as the underlying and non-manifest system of invariant traits. Thus it is not solely the immediately perceptible traits.

What are these invariant traits that semiotics defines? Roughly they constitute the underlying system that corresponds to the specificity and intelligibility of all phenomena. As Deely considers, “The underlying system is an imperceptible content lending structure to the perceptible insofar as it signifies and conveys precisely the historical experience of the individual and group” (Deely et al, 1986: xiv). Semiotic theory constructs a model of it in an attempt to make visible this non-perceptible system.

Similarly semiotic film theory identifies the properties and parts of the underlying system of films and the way they interconnect and function. These can be understood through a system of codes. Codes function in language as well where speech (*parole*) is generated when codes selected from the underlying system are combined according to rules constituting its intelligibility. Therefore meaning is produced from the structural relations that exist between these codes. The combination of these codes produces speech, which only makes sense when comprehended in relation to a wider containing structure (*langue*). Codes, rather than existing in films, are only the rules which allow messages and meanings of a film to be communicated.

For the purpose of the model developed in this thesis, the concept of code will encapsulate its specificity. By the concept of specificity, it can be said that there are certain codes which are inherent to the medium of film and are found nowhere else. Metz’s ‘accelerated montage’ is a prime example. In it:

a certain form is imprinted on the images and sounds (image A and image B alternate in progressively shorter and quicker fragments).

This code delivers a distinct message that no normal viewer will miss (the signified of image A and image B, while existing in separate spaces, are interlocked in time and are converging on each other spatially and dramatically). (Andrew, 1976: 225)

Image cannot exist if the cinema does not deliver it. The model developed for this thesis uses this concept of cinema-specific codes to construct the possibility of filmic speech itself.

Interestingly, non-specific cultural codes are also transferred into film. These include the products of culture itself and they have the ability to speak to audiences. If conventions govern the use of codes, then it can also be presumed that the values of the users of these conventions can be incorporated in some way into these codes. The users develop signs to draw attention to and distinctions between the things which are of significance in their culture. The ideologies prevalent in cultures are incorporated into these codes.

Fiske, while considering the relationship between reality and codes, declares:

Reality is always encoded, or rather the only way we can perceive and make sense of reality is by the codes of our culture. There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it. What passes for reality in any culture is the product of the cultures' codes, so 'reality' is always already encoded, it is never 'raw'. (Fiske, 1987: 4-5)

The interpretation of a film is thus a function of its social context; and social context defined here is the set of rules and conventions that audiences in given circumstances apply to a particular film they see. Audiences inscribe a film text with their "systems of knowledge, belief, symbolic action and social practice" (Elsaesser, 1995: 8). This links back to the concept of 'mental sets' audiences bring with them, referred to in the Introduction.

The social dimension in semiotics is consequently represented by the conventions of codes, because they operate within a broad cultural framework. "There is no

intelligible discourse without the operation of a code.” (Hall, 1980: 131) Signifying systems depend on it. Film as a signifying system also depends on it.

Codes and conventions, which are dominant in the specific socio-cultural contexts and roles in which we are socialised, are learnt in order to ‘read’ or make sense of the world. Our sense of who we are as individuals is the most important constancy in our understanding of reality. Society depends upon the fact that its members accord its founding fictions, myths, or codes a status which is taken for granted (Nichols, 1981: 30).

Roles, conventions, attitudes, language - to varying degrees are internalised in order to be repeated, and through the constancies of repetition a consistent locus gradually emerges: the self. Although never fully determined by these internalisations, the self would be entirely undetermined without them. (Nichols, 1981: 30)

Codes can sometimes be so widely distributed in a specific culture and learned at such an early age that they can:

appear not to be constructed - the effect of an articulation between sign and referent - but to be ‘naturally’ given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved a ‘near-universality’ in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently ‘natural’ visual codes are culture-specific. However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly *naturalised*. (Hall, 1980: 132)

Individuals are not aware of the intervention of codes in the construction of reality because learning them involves adopting the values, assumptions and ‘world views’ built into them. Hence understanding a sign involves interpreting the appropriate codes which are familiar to the interpreter. On encountering a signifier, individuals may assume that it is an instance of a familiar rule, and then infer what it signifies from applying that rule (Eco, 1976: 131).

Codes have origins and they also evolve. They are dynamic systems which change over time and are not only socio-culturally placed, but also historically placed.

Conventions are established through the process of codification. Metz explains how in Hollywood cinema the white hat became codified as the signifier of a 'good' cowboy (Metz 1974a). Though this convention eventually became over-used and was abandoned, it nonetheless is telling of the conventions employed by the cinema to represent certain socially established norms of society. A significant question analysed in greater detail in the next part of this thesis, will be the operation of these conventions and in particular examples of films from Australian cinema, which ostensibly represent Indigenous reality. Here it is sufficient to say that the semiotic endeavour is centred on the operation of codes. Ascribing the meaning generating power of images to codes at work within the text of the film, situates filmic codes at a level of hierarchy and interdependence more than that of mere cinematic conventions. But this is still less rigid than a syntax or inflexible language system.

## 2. Visual Construct of the Model

Underlying the model are four overlapping traits of,

- A) The cinema system
- B) Individual films
- C) Montage, and
- D) Individual shots

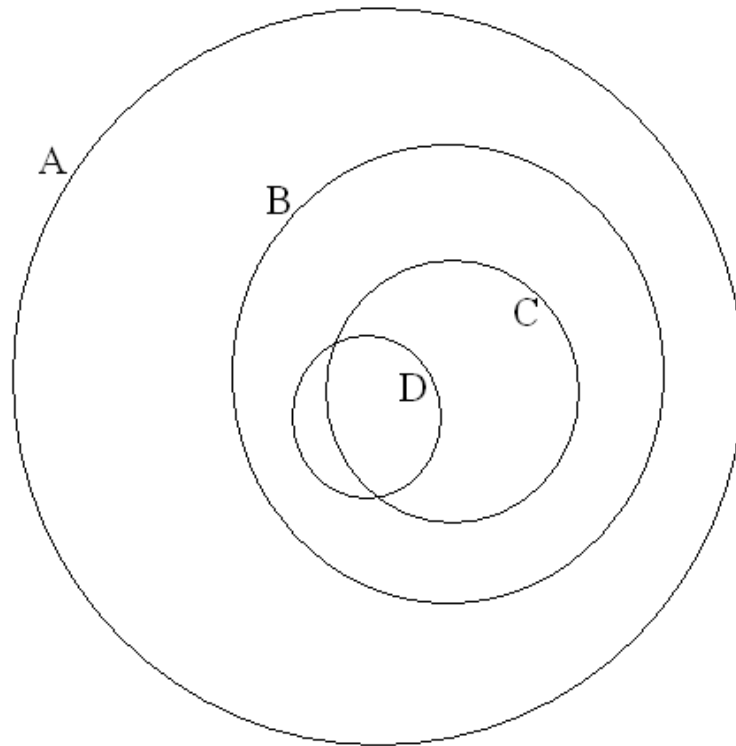
These have been placed in a Venn diagram similar to the one developed by Buckland for Metz's five traits to define filmic specificity (Buckland, 2000: 8). Buckland explains that the specificity of cinema lies in the specific combinations of the traits of (a) iconicity, (b) mechanical duplication, (c) multiplicity, (d) movement and mechanically produced multiple moving images. He uses a Venn diagram to illustrate the overlapping of these traits. However, this is where the similarity of the diagram in this thesis with Buckland's diagram ends.

Noticeably, the model developed for this thesis uses both the individual film and the cinematic system. The individual film (*parole*) is encompassed inside a more general cinematic system (*langue*). It organises the underlying traits inherent in all films which remain unchanged when applied in generality to the cinema and moves from the wider concept of the cinema system right down to individual shots.

The purpose of the diagram is to present a model to briefly define how the cinema functions as a visual signifier and the differing levels individual combinations of shots form representations of images. The differing specific combinations of these shots present different 'realities' on screen, which is seen as relevant for a semiotic analysis of representations, and in particular on filmic representations of Indigenous identity analysed in the next part of this thesis.



Diagrammatically it is seen as:



Where:

- A) Is the Cinema System
- B) Are Individual Films
- C) Is Montage (Sequence of shots)
- D) Is the Individual Shot

### 3. Explanation of Terms Used in the Model

#### A) The Cinema System

The system of cinema is larger than individual films, but encapsulates them within it. While the individual film is the locus of message organisation, the cinema system organises these individual films into a group of films.

Considered here, it is a system of signs organised according to codes and sub-codes which reflect values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the cultural system in which it is prevalent. These codes may be defined as the textual features of a film. It might be more prudent to say that the operation of codes in the text do not establish the meanings of films, but that dominant codes tend to constrain them. This constraint of dominant codes, in the cinema system, identifies genres, periods, and even auteur studies in film (Andrew, 1976: 226). It comprises particular codes which appear only in a certain number of films, consequently limiting its meaning.

One such a fundamental textual code is genre. Viewers sometimes go not to see a film (a single system) but a particular genre of film, e.g. the Hollywood Western, which is part of a larger text comprising many single systems or films. This larger text is rife with particular codes of dress, landscape, behaviour, and so on, which appear in no other types of films all at once. Hence, the Hollywood Western genre is uniquely recognisable by its locale and mise-en-scene. Closer to the Australian western genre film is the Bushranger film, a majority of which feature the presence of an Aboriginal companion character or tracker. Thus the codes that distinguish genres popularly define them. Even the normal code of acting, while helping create signification, changes when seen in relation to the entire cinema system from which it emerges, in the sense that different genres of film portray different kinds of acting.

Different genres, whether classified by medium (e.g. comic, cartoon, film, TV, painting) or by content (e.g. Western, Science Fiction, Romantic Comedy) establish sets of modality markers and an overall value which acts as a baseline for the genre. This baseline can be different for different viewers, and for different texts or moments within texts (Hodge & Kress, 1988: 142). What are recognized as

‘realistic’ styles of representation reflect an aesthetic code. Over time, certain methods of production within a medium and a genre become naturalized. The role of the viewer becomes purely that of a consumer and:

The signifier is treated as if it were identical with a pre-existent signified. Signifier and signified appear not only to unite, but the signifier seems to become transparent so that the concept seems to present itself, and the arbitrary sign is naturalized by a spurious identity between reference and referents, between the text and the world. (Tagg, 1988: 99)

The content comes to be accepted as a ‘reflection of reality’. Consequently, reality seems to pre-exist its representation and to ‘speak for itself’. What is said has the aura of ‘truth’. This is less applicable to genres such as Westerns where the identification of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are distinguishable from their filmic representation of it. Some genres are more liable to undergo this process of representing reality to the viewer than other genres.

In established definitions of genre, particular conventions of content themes or settings and form including structure and style, are shared by the text belonging to them. Film genres are more problematic than literary genres to place in the strictest sense of this definition. Film genres overlap and frequently exhibit the conventions of multiple genres.

A complete overview of genre taxonomies is beyond the scope of this thesis. However the genres the model developed for this thesis alludes to is more of a genre *code* useful in considering the properties regarded as distinctive to genre by its viewers. Film theorists list various textual properties of a genre (Chandler, 2000) as:

- (a) Narrative- plots and structures, situations, sequences, episodes.
- (b) Characterisation- similar types of characters (sometimes stereotypes), roles, personal qualities, goals and behaviour.
- (c) Themes- basic topics: social, cultural, political, sexual, moral subject matters.
- (d) Setting- historical and geographical.

- (e) Iconography- a familiar stock of motifs whose connotations have become fixed, primarily visual including décor, costumes and objects, ‘typecast’ performers (some who may have become icons), familiar patterns of dialogue, music and sounds.
- (f) Filmic Techniques- formal conventions of stylistic camerawork, lighting, sound recording, use of colour, editing (viewers being less conscious of these than those relating to content).

The cinema system thus encompasses individual films which, when classified together, start forming a pattern of conformation to one genre or another. This concept is used in the next part of this thesis, when analysing films representing Indigenous identity, where the first element of analysis will be to ascertain the cinema system to which they correspond and the techniques and textual properties they exhibit.

#### B) Individual Films

In the text of a film, codes intertwine with others to form signs which never operate in isolation. The filmic text is the individual film where countless codes come together. It marks the boundaries in which filmmakers operate and creates a context for meaning. It organises and structures codes so that they play proper roles in the creation of signification. Hence the various codes of a film do not exist alongside each other in the minds of audiences, but are systematized according to a particular configuration and pre-patterned context.

#### C) Montage

Simply defined, montage consists of a juxtaposition of one shot with another. However it is not restricted to a mere editing or combining of images. It is not possible to trace the development and expansion of the vast concept of montage in this thesis. Hence it is used here only in its minimal understanding: that of organisation in a filmic sense, within and between shots.

Early work on the theory of montage focuses on Eisenstein’s seemingly structuralist assertion that the combination of two shots could produce a whole greater than the sum of its parts, in the claim that “two film pieces of any kind, placed together,

inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of the juxtaposition” (Eisenstein, 1943: 14). Hence, it might allow associated ideas to arise through viewer constructed common and established links. This links back to Kuleshov’s experiment circa 1918 (Pudovkin, 1954: 140) which consisted of combining the footage of an actor’s face (shot x), neutral and expressionless, with three other pieces of film shots (A, B, C), with the structure result of A, x, B, x, C, x. Shot A was a bowl of steaming soup, shot B was a woman in a coffin, and shot C was of a child playing with a teddy bear. The edited shots are shown to an audience who are unaware of the real situation, but who all appear to notice that the actor is reacting appropriately to each previous shot, even though the shot of the actor remains the same.

Through montage, it seemed a unified sense of time and space was manufactured from disconnected fragments. The viewers did not fail to ‘jump to conclusions’. This end product or conclusion reached by the viewer is an essential part of analysis in a thesis looking at representation. Montage can form representational complexes for images of Indigenous identity on screen. The way shots are combined could in fact result in an arrangement of a new image, a new understanding of the person, place or thing being represented, or present juxtaposed images which reinforce stereotypes.

Eisenstein considered montage to be a collision and “from collision of two given factors arises a concept,” (Eisenstein, 1929: 37) so “montage is a [concept] that arises from the collision of independent shots” (Eisenstein, 1929: 49). This explains the nature of montage as Eisenstein ultimately viewed it, as an event that gave rise to an active idea. The shot itself remained neutral until it ‘collided’ with another shot. This play of ideas was the true essence of montage. Through this careful selection and relation of shots, specific ideas could be made to arise in the minds of viewers. Such an understanding of montage is used in this thesis.

Eisenstein however laid himself open to conceiving of film as a tool for disseminating propaganda. In this he makes a careful distinction and believes that the spectator is always involved in eliciting creativity similar to the film-maker as the

artist and creator of images. Communication is not possible unless the artist and the spectator share a common 'imaginative faculty' (Whittock, 1990: 71).

Eisenstein stated that the strength of montage resided in the fact that it includes the emotions and mind of the spectator in the creative process. "The spectator is compelled to proceed along the selfsame creative road that the author travelled in creating the image" (Eisenstein, 1943: 34-35). Image needs to be understood as a synthesis of artistic themes (Eisenstein, 1943: 33). The internal creative acts of audiences and the mind's comprehension of the significance of images, enabling it to combine disparate elements into meaningful wholes (Whittock, 1990: 71), all point to the fact that the viewing of these images for audiences becomes a participatory act. Audiences are not the passive receptacles of images shown on screen but are involved in the active labour of 'making things mean', as contended by Stuart Hall (1982). These ideas inform the analysis of films in the next part of this thesis.

#### D) Individual Shots

A shot is a single run of the camera and the subsequent quantity of film that is produced from such a run. The shot is sometimes understood to be the smallest unit of the cinema. It is tempting to liken the cinematic shot to a word, the smallest descriptor in linguistic analysis. Shots in film sequences, however, differ greatly from words. The cinema works with shots of a constructed reality, and has nothing similar to the linguistic phoneme. The strongest argument for this point lies in the fact that signifying objects exist *within* a shot, with the possibility of an infinite number of such signifying objects being found in a single shot. A cinematic shot, for this analysis, is treated as a unit of discourse, unlike a word, which is a lexical unit.

There are various conventions filmmakers use to convey meaning through particular camera and editing techniques, which are ultimately for deliberate effect. These camera techniques are clumped together in descriptions of various shots such as the long shot, establishing shots, medium shots, point of view shots, close ups, wide angled shots, titled shots, and others (Appendix 4). The 'grammar of the cinema' is therefore intimately linked to the combination of various shots.

#### 4. How Terms Used in the Model Collaborate

Quite simply, as shown in the diagram, the underlying level of the cinema system lends structure to the surface level of individual films, montages and shots. In linguistics, Saussurean commutation dictates that speech (*parole*) is an infinity of messages generated by a finite underlying language system (*langue*). The operation of the language system allows for infinite combinations in speech. By this logic, the system of the cinema also lends structure to and is generated by the elements or individual films it encompasses. Hence the two exist in a symbiosis. The cinema system encompasses individual films, montages, and shots. Without the operation of the genre and the finite systemic qualities of the cinema the infinite combinations of shots to form sequences of montages, which in turn form individual films, cannot be understood.

When individual films (consisting of single shots and their combinations) form a structure it is mitigated by the conventions of the cinema system in which it operates. Viewed as separate units, the three elements of shots, montage, and individual films (itself formed by the two elements of shots and montage) overlap in circles, as illustrated, within the larger system of the cinema. It is impossible to view one element without the other, just as it is impossible to separate the underlying principles of the cinema from the films it describes.

What this means for an analysis of representation is that individual films seem to have separate meaning generation qualities of their own. When they are placed in relation to the system in which they operate, their complexes of representation cannot be separated from the messages they convey. Analyses of individual films in terms of representation thus encompass the system of the cinema, which ultimately depends on audiences and conventions. Individual films (consisting of single shots and montages) can only form structures when they are mitigated by the conventions of the cinema system in which they operate.

Do Australian films with representations of Indigenous characters within them fall into the aesthetic code? Does such an aesthetic code recognise only certain 'realistic' styles of representation as reflective? The case analysed in this thesis focuses on how reality sometimes can pre-exist its representation simply through the unification of signifier with a pre-existent signified.



## **Chapter 10: Method of Film Analysis**

In analysing filmic narratives selected for this study, certain themes are extracted and interrogated in detail. The thread that runs through these common themes is that of race, identity and representation. The fundamental theme is that of Aboriginality being related to non-Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginality has long been viewed as the number of ways non-Aboriginal Australians narrate themselves in relation to it.

The connotations of Aboriginality within the films chosen for analysis produce popular cultural icons for non-Aboriginal Australians, which are necessarily engaged with the problem of interpretation. In reinforcing set stereotypes, or not, as the case may be, the filmic narratives engage with relations conceived of as 'self' and 'Other'. The ability of these narratives to picture an abstraction like Aboriginality and to represent it is also explored. This representation of Aboriginal identity lies between characters that are transfixed within and by a narrative. They are represented by the inherent codes and language used by the specific film under scrutiny. How these vectors of filmic narrative carry identities in their underlying denotations is investigated. Thus an analysis of filmic narratives considered will be typified through semiotic markers.

The analysis relies heavily on a study of Muecke's (1982, 1992) assertions on discourses of Aboriginal people which tend to fall roughly between the categories of the Romantic and the Racist. While Muecke himself considers this as being a static model (Langton, 1993; Muecke, 1994), this thesis considers the intricacies involved between racist and romantic representations as resting on binarism and the tendency to mark Aboriginality according to 'conventional' expectations. These conventional expectations of Aboriginality can trace their roots to European representations of Aboriginal cultural identities, which have played a key role in the validation of colonialism and its associated violence. These colonial representations continue to operate in critical ways, especially in overt representations of Indigenous identity within film texts. While not being excessively apparent in their 'racism', a lack of 'true' identity representation is tantamount to it. Australian cinema has been unwilling to "engage with matters of social or political significance" (McFarlane,

2003: 1). The perceived lack of cultural viability within Indigenous culture has often been used as a platform for racially based policies and practices.

This thesis, as a study of film texts in the context of the dominant social practices of the time in which they were produced and viewed, relies heavily on non-Aboriginal understandings and constructions of a perceived Aboriginality. Some of these constructions of Aboriginality, as viewed in the films examined in the next part, pre-empt a labelling of Indigenous identity on screen as being 'primitive', as opposed to non-Indigenous 'civilised'. This understanding of Aboriginal identity, as being on the lowest rung in the ladder of 'progress', negates arguments in favour of mere romantic clichés in representations, in favour of a more subtle and covert racism. This covert racism is explored through the romantic primitivist assumptions on the part of white characters, the film narrative itself, and Aboriginal characters who are evaluated according to a transformed Aboriginal reality, which is often constructed for them through the narrative itself.

This thesis also analyses the specific connotative markers created for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. The Assimilation Policy, the notions of the modern primitive, historical guilt, and Aboriginal people seen as fugitives from justice are some of the major themes probed. The narrative of the film itself, the story line, is considered an equally important focus for this thesis along with the unique identity representations contained in it.

The description of the 'Other' for an 'us' is a tendency further explored in the film analysis in the next part. Not only does it bring to the study questions regarding the constructions of Aboriginality, but also seemingly plausible representations of Indigenous identity. Connotations at the level of the viewer imply the social contexts viewers bring with them to a particular film they see. Within this social context lie stereotypes of representations. The external social and political climate of an age filters into the cultural productions of that age. Clear examples of this external climate lie in films chosen for analysis in this thesis such as *Jedda*, which many commentators read as a text on the ethics and feasibility of assimilation (Jennings, 1993). How *Jedda* used these available discourses on assimilation is examined further.

This thesis, while being informed by previous studies on socio-political backgrounds operative at various times, differs from them. It attempts to identify specific connotations and denotations of identity within film texts. For example, a combination of connotations and denotations lead to constructions of Indigenous identity within the text of *Jedda*. The historical contexts and terms of reference *Jedda* operates within were shaped by Chauvel's ideologies of 1950s Australia. The film text and its connotations are thus not seen in isolation, but by their operation within the larger social system.

An additional indication of stereotypical connotations looked at in detail in this study is that of the stereotype of the bush wise, 'mystic' Aboriginal person and their affinity to the natural, as seen in *Jedda*'s characterisation of Marbuk. The stereotype implied is one of the 'noble savage', also objectified and presented to the audience in *Walkabout*. The deaths of the central characters in both these narratives carry connotations of an eventual death of the culture as well. The operation of such connotations is revealed in the analysis.

Changes in race relations are additionally interrogated in the analysis of films through the next part. In such an analysis, a consideration of how the narrative manages to promote the idea of 'hard working' Aboriginal people who wish to have a 'nice' home and be assimilated is explored. This assumption is starkly apparent in the texts of *Jedda* and later questioned by Moffatt in *Night Cries*.

To summarise, the methodological analysis of this thesis is centred on the questions:

- What do the analysed representations of Indigenous identity in Australian cinema elaborate through a semiotic study?
- Can a study of cinematic representations lead to a better understanding of Aboriginal identity?
- What do the semiotic markers of connotations, myths, absent signifiers, and binary oppositions elucidate of the nature of Aboriginal representations in Australian cinema through a 'change over time'?

In the next section, analysis of the four individual films chosen for this study, these questions will be examined in detail bearing in mind the themes that have emerged through a semiotic methodological enquiry.

## PART III

### AN ANALYSIS OF FILM TEXTS

*I am an invisible [black] man...I am invisible, understand, simply because people refused to see me...It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed everything and anything except me. Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes...*  
(Ellison, 1995: 7)

In this part, the context of analysis brings together cinematic representations of Indigenous identity through a discussion of four films which have informed contemporary and historical debates on the treatment of stories regarding Aboriginal Australia. The framework of analysis picks up on how these films are centred in the ideologies of their time and the contemporary debates of assimilation, identity formation, and stereotypical representation that they project.

This part of the thesis is structured to highlight the various themes that run through the films, how these impact on representations of Aboriginal identity and eventually inform changes in cinematic representation. Each film is treated as a text holding within it connotative markers of Aboriginality and Indigenous identity. The film texts will be analysed separately to reveal the underlying themes. These underlying themes are then related to the social milieu of the time in which the films were produced. These themes will then be drawn together for a final comparative analysis of changes in cinematic representations of Indigenous identity.

## Chapter 11: Beginnings – *Jedda*

The earliest work chosen to be examined is that of Charles Chauvel's *Jedda*, which forms the starting point of the 1950s for the analysis of films. "The filmmaking achievement of Charles Chauvel is as impressive as that of Cinesound, but of a different order" (Molloy, 1990: 101). Cinesound features resulted in a brief but intense period of continuous production between 1932 and 1940, with seventeen films being produced. Chauvel's two silent and seven sound features were produced over a period of almost thirty years, with the first, *The Moth of Moonbi*, being released in 1926 and the last, *Jedda*, in 1955.

No other Australian film-maker of his generation demonstrated such commitment to the ideal of films made in Australia. For most of those thirty years 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*.

Charles Chauvel's considerable interest in the dramatisation of cross-cultural interactions is visible in his early works including *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933) and *Uncivilised* (1936). Although *In the Wake of the Bounty* is not set in Australia, it foreshadows a situation of cultural conflict. In the Prologue of the film, the audience is informed that:

It is the first in a series of great travel films...depicting strange incidents, strange places and strange peoples...the Mutiny on the Bounty has been acclaimed as the most tragic and strange sea story of all time, when a crew of British sailors...signed a sinister pact with a pagan race to live in isolation upon a rock at the bottom of the world...Expeditionary Films has not spared time or money to blaze a

new trail, a trail which they hope will lead to many pleasant hours amidst Adventure and Romance. (Molloy, 1990: 104-105)

This prologue provides insight into the views that Chauvel held on what subjects were suitable for film production. Movement on an epic scale became a principle feature right up to his latter productions, including *Jedda*. The elements of 'Adventure and Romance', which were interestingly capitalised in the prologue, became keynotes in the films to follow, setting a desire for 'exotic' locations which was to become characteristic of Chauvel's films.

*In the Wake of the Bounty* is structured into two parts; a hybrid of dramatised documentary shot in studio settings and actual film footage shot on location in Tahiti and Pitcairn Island. This dislocated ethnology was never employed by Chauvel again. However *In the Wake of the Bounty* did foreshadow the thematic and structural direction of his later works, including *Jedda*, which expressed through cinematic composition the interaction of two distinct cultures articulated via male-female relationships.

The narratives of Chauvel's films touched upon cultural tensions but always stressed the sense of the continuities of history and the importance of interpreting the present in the light of the past, as indicated in his book "Walkabout" (1959) co-authored with his wife Elsa. This sense of a colonial continuity in history was presented through his films in the need to assimilate archetypal figures into the national consciousness of the time. In his other major work highlighting cultural tensions, *Uncivilised*, Chauvel exploited the dramatic potential of a narrative intertwined closely with sexual, class and racial attitudes. His attitude towards Indigenous people in this film seemed ambivalent and not far removed from the stereotypes. At the same time it was sympathetic to the tribal way of life. *Uncivilised* had the Hollywood exotica of the 1930s, but was firmly based on the conventional attitudes in Australia at the time of its making. Chauvel's sense of continuity in Australian social history and film was being carried forward.



*Jedda* came as Chauvel's final attempt at portraying European-Aboriginal 'cultural' relations. Made almost twenty years after *Uncivilised*, it is seen as being a more serious undertaking on cross-cultural interactions. The correlation between ethnographic and social typage was used by Chauvel in his presentation of *Jedda*.

An unsourced document in Chauvel's papers sets out the 'subjects for films' in a documentary mode covering the differing cultural structure of the 'tribal natures' on reserves, in pastoral districts, in towns and settlements, and the situation of 'part-aborigines'. (Cunningham, 1987: 35)

Chauvel examined closely the contemporary interrelations between the ethnographic study of and policy pertaining to Aboriginal culture at the time.

The policy of assimilation and the policy-oriented anthropological studies based on it informed Chauvel in the making of *Jedda*. It was read to be a "dramatised debate about the ethics and feasibility of assimilation" (Jennings, 1993:33). The Assimilation policy noted that: "Policies... have been amended on the principle that Aborigines are citizens, and that special legislation ... is to assist them in realising their citizenship. It is *welfare*, rather than protective, legislation" (Elkin, 1964: 369). Hence contemporary debates during Chauvel's film making career centred on the belief that the Aboriginal people were an inferior dying race, and consequently were given a polar choice "of being frozen in an image of unchanging tradition or dismissed as 'shattered' and thus better off being assimilated completely" (O'Malley, 1994:63).

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.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the government had realized that the Protectorate system had failed. It had ensured the removal of Aboriginal groups from their lands onto reserves and missions and despite humanitarian intentions on the part of a number of early colonists, this policy allowed complete access by settlers, including governments, to the land. The consequence of this was the exclusion of Aboriginal people from their own lands.

Aboriginal people were treated as incompetent to manage their own lives and were subject to arbitrary rule by mission managers and the police. Those Aboriginal people who were outside reserves became ‘fringe-dwellers’ on riverbanks or the edges of towns. During the first half of the twentieth century there existed a patchwork of differing State (and in the Northern Territory, Commonwealth) laws under which Aboriginal people were prevented from entering hotels, from marrying without permission or from living within town boundaries. Aboriginal workers had their wages held in trust by police or mission managers who gave out ‘pocket money’ as they saw fit. These views served to reinforce the existing segregation policies and catapult the growth of the assimilationist viewpoint.

Assimilation was seen in the language of Social Darwinism, as a natural process of “survival of the fittest”. According to it, 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 belonged to a dying race and that they 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’.

*Jedda* used the available discourses on assimilation and articulated a number of competing positions within them. The ambivalence expressed in *Jedda* thus has to be seen in the historical contexts and terms of reference it operated within, which were in the end shaped by Chauvel’s ideologies and socio historical patterns of assimilation.

Chauvel’s ideologies were evident in the structural similarities between his films about racial interactions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. *Uncivilised* shared *Jedda*’s abduction story. The woman is confronted by a choice of social acceptance versus her own attraction to a repellent social union with an ‘Other’. Both films share abduction and journey sequences which dramatise the shock involved in the change from a more ‘civilised’ to a less ‘civilised’ environment and adaptation to a social code vastly removed from the one the female protagonist observed.

In both *Uncivilised* and *Jedda*, the possibility of miscegenation between the male and female protagonists was not acceptable to the audience in terms of their contemporary social conventions. Racial origins always transcended social origins, where *Jedda* was instinctively drawn into patterns of sensuality because of the belief in her inherent racial behavioural tendencies towards it. It is reminiscent of the social rhetoric of ‘uncivilised’ Aboriginal culture being in opposition to ‘civilised’ white culture and thus better off being assimilated.

*Jedda* begins with aerial shots of the stark Australian landscape of the Northern Territory, as a narrator who identifies himself as ‘Joe’ gives a description of his Aboriginal mother’s people as a “race so old that their laws and religions stretch to a past beyond our thinking”. This sets a connotative precedent from the very beginning as the deep notes of the didgeridoo effectively contrast with the conventional western instruments to create a connotative syntax of the cultural tensions which later follow.

A crucial formation of this connotative syntax is also presented through character development. Chauvel uses this at crucial points throughout the filmic narrative to support the assimilationist viewpoint, which is separately highlighted and discussed here. The first of such character representations is that of Sarah and Doug McMann.

The cut from the opening montage to the next scene is dramatic: from a distressed Sarah McMann (Betty Suttor) at Mongala Buffalo Station contacting the Flying Doctor base because she has just suffered the loss of an infant son, to a chain of waterholes where the death of an Aboriginal woman, wife of one of the stockmen, has occurred during childbirth. The shifting montages allow the story to unfold efficiently, where a cattle drover, Felix Romeo, decides that the best chances for survival of this “native Pintari child born in the dust of the cattle tracks” is to take her to Sarah McMann because she is “one woman who understands these people”. When Romeo and the child’s father arrive at the cattle station they hear of Sarah’s grief and despite showing initial reluctance, tell her of the baby’s plight. Her reaction is one of practicality, where she states “alright Felix, you can leave it...Doug’ll be glad to add another piccaninny to the tribe-he says we haven’t enough for the future.” The film echoes the sentiments of its time.

The Aboriginal house girl remarks, “white baby fly out, black baby fly in”, and it seems in an instant that the ‘problem’ of Sarah’s grief is solved. Her initial resentment of Jedda evaporates and she becomes increasingly engrossed in Jedda’s upbringing, who has become a surrogate child. The denotations of Sarah’s happiness are shown through her progressive delays in passing Jedda onto the station lubras; however there are subtle undertones of anxiety on Sarah’s part. Jedda learns from the station ‘piccaninnies’ “the first lesson of their race, the lesson of tracks” sketched in the dust outside the station homestead. Sarah tries to shield Jedda from 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 on 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.

Joe's voice in these scenes, in classic documentary style as the narrator, guides the viewer's interpretation and slots Sarah's behaviour into a framework of oppression through statements like "But always there would be the restraining voice of Sarah McMann" and "sometimes Jedda would escape the watchful eye of the missus". Jedda's (Ngarla Kunothe) adoptive mother, Sarah McMann, hence provides the film's clearest statement on assimilation. Underpinning her beliefs and perhaps even the love in her mind for the 'black' child is the notion that the 'blacks' are lower than the 'whites', no matter how much one tried to bring them closer to the 'civilised' way of life. Her constant fear is that Jedda would become a "naked monkey" again if she did not control the inherent instincts that she believes Jedda is born with.

This can be related to a more generalised fear about the "degenerative power of the bush" (Jennings, 1993:34). Her husband Doug (George Simpson-Lyttle), on the other hand, takes a more pragmatic, albeit racist view of the 'primitiveness' of the Aboriginal people. His apparent cultural relativism lies in the belief that "they don't tame-only on the surface". This tolerance of 'otherness' is a different kind of affection from Sarah's, and was sublimated by Chauvel under a "veneer of cultural respect" (Jennings, 1993:34).

*Jedda* conforms to a

systematic *staging* of conflicting positions that reflects a desire on Chauvel's part to document and narrativise a full range of Aboriginal cultural spaces...and to maintain the disparity and inadequacy of both central positions - the crude versions of assimilation and cultural integrity espoused by Sarah and Doug McMann respectively. (Cunningham, 1987:35)

The cause of this process in *Jedda* appears as an attempt by Chauvel to maintain the disparity and inadequacy of both of the film's central positions – and present a dialogue between assimilation and cultural integrity. The crudity of these two positions maximises the melodramatic force of *Jedda*.

Sarah's assimilationist position is articulated through her language, character and performance but hystericised 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.

Sarah's 'moral purity' is made evident when she recoils in horror when Jedda tells her of her dream to go walkabout, and chastises her by responding, "whatever would you do out there with all those naked monkeys?" and goes on to claim that Jedda is no more like the station blacks than "night is to day". She dismisses Jedda's plea that she is Aboriginal and insists, "I have other plans for you, Jedda. I want you to go on living like a white girl, like my own daughter." Implicit in Sarah's statement is a hope for Jedda go on living in the white 'civilised' way of life. Aboriginality is hence equated through Sarah with a sense of dismay. Sarah's well intentioned love for Jedda is only up to the point where she can control Jedda's desire and make her 'live like a white girl', keeping Jedda away from her own cultural heritage.

Sarah's decision to keep Jedda away from her culture culminates in the dilemma felt by her to 'protect' Jedda, as well as in Doug's accusation that she is trying to turn Jedda from "a little magpie into a tame canary". Sarah insists that she will not let "that child slip back". The scene where Sarah and Doug exchange their views on Jedda's upbringing exemplifies very effectively the central themes of assimilation, family life and cross cultural interactions in the film and also the dominant attitudes to Aboriginal conditions in 1950's Australia. Sarah insists that, "I've done so much with her. I'd stop them all going on these stupid walkabouts if I had my way. Each year I keep them [Aboriginal house girls] in clean dresses. I doctor their sore eyes, and give them good, wholesome food. And then what happens? They go bush on this wretched walkabout and come back to me looking like bedraggled skeletons. I don't know what they do." There is an obvious connotation that the 'unknown way of life' is inferior, and this only goes to reinforce the assimilationist position adopted by the 'well intentioned', like Sarah McMann. Her objection lies in the fact that she does not want Jedda to "slip back" into her 'own' way of life, a strong connotation for the deliberate presentation of the merits of the Assimilation policies.

The second significant character representation is that of the narrator described as 'half caste' Joe (Paul Reynell), interestingly with no surname, who is head stockman

and Jedda's intended husband. By fulfilling his childhood ambition of becoming the head stockman, he has truly endeavoured to and acquired the ideal white aspiration. Jedda, mirroring Sarah's aspirations, should inherently be attracted to him. Sarah approves and sees the union as "the answer to all her worries about Jedda's future" because "her one fear has been that Jedda might mate with one of her tribe."

The scene where Joe finally announces his intentions to Jedda later in the film concretises the film's connotations of assimilation. Joe tells Jedda of his love for her at the river bank, and calls her his "lubra". He is shown to be the success story of assimilation. This is symbolized in his desire to own a "little house with four walls and a roof" and "frilly curtains". Jedda however is not so easy to 'tame'. She still yearns for the real cultural life of her people; a request Joe refuses to take seriously.

Even when Marbuk, the so-called unassimilated 'savage', takes Jedda to his own land, instead of being welcomed by his people he is punished for bringing shame on the tribe by bringing a girl of the 'wrong skin colour'. "One could argue that what undoes Jedda is not her thwarting of Sarah's assimilationist ambitions but her breach of Aboriginal law, for Marbuk and Jedda are 'wrong skin'" (Jennings, 1993:37). This naïve and racist discourse that Chauvel presents as a juxtaposition to the assimilationist viewpoint is arguably a re-writing of Australian history. Langton notes that:

It rewrites Australian history so that the black rebel against white colonial rule is a rebel against the laws of his own society. Marbuk, a 'wild' Aboriginal man, is condemned to death, not by the white coloniser, but by his own elders. It 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)

At this juncture it is crucial to point out how Chauvel juxtaposes the theme surrounding 'wrong skin' onto the filmic narrative, connoting how Jedda and Marbuk are inevitably doomed to destruction. At the end of the film, upon Jedda and Marbuk's arrival at Marbuk's tribal land, they are met by the stern reproaches of the waiting warriors. An ultimatum is delivered to Marbuk regarding his violation of the tribal skin code. Marbuk rejects this and sits defiant as they sing his death song. The

Marakoola women, for her participation in the transgression, strike Jedda. Marbuk continues to be defiant of the death song and drags Jedda away to a rocky outcrop where lays a sacred Aboriginal burial ground. Jedda cries for Sarah while Marbuk becomes crazed by his “singing”. Ultimately they are plunged to their deaths at the edge of the gorge as Joe and the policemen watch helplessly. The sound of Marbuk’s insane laughter reverberates.

The image of their deaths presents a clear connotation on screen and a message of futility of their situation that carries beyond. In the end, it is Marbuk and Jedda themselves who are responsible for their own destruction, by a breach of Aboriginal law, rather than a complexity of colonial rule and its consequences, which as a theme remains unarticulated.

The crux of the film’s negotiation of difference lies in the representation of Jedda and Marbuk being of the ‘wrong skin’. Ethnographic realism and signifying practices for the convenience of narrative centrality used untrained social actors as stars. The mise-en-scene of Aboriginal “stars” Ngarla Kunoth (Jedda) and Robert Tudawali (Marbuk), heighten the melodramatic possibilities within the film.

Chauvel realised that he would need to cast people who had been in contact with ‘whites’, while retaining ‘native exotica’. As part of the film’s exoticness, the twenty four year old Tiwi ‘boy’ from Darwin was cast and given the tribal name of ‘Tudawali’, instead of Bob Wilson. Similarly Rosie Kunoth, whom Chauvel ‘found’ at an Anglican mission outside Alice Springs, was baptised ‘Ngarla’ for her role as Jedda. Both actors needed firm inducement to be photographed, let alone act their scenes. Kunoth sulked because she was too embarrassed to explain why the touching required for her scenes with Tudawali were forbidden to her. In reality, Ngarla Kunoth and Robert Tudawali were ‘wrong skin’ as well. This translation to events on screen forms an additional ‘inversion of truth’.

As a binary opposition, the film’s inherent theme of ‘civilised’/‘uncivilised’ forms the next point of analysis. The opposition of ‘civilised’ and ‘primitive’, white and black, form identity representations within constructed themes. Direct connotations of such oppositions are present in various discourses throughout the film, which



unfold in scenes such as Jedda playing the piano, as well as scenes of Marbuk's 'primitive' influence which awakens in Jedda the same 'primitive' instincts.

In an early scene Jedda plays the piano. As it swells louder in the soundtrack, the camera fixes the attention of the viewer on the Aboriginal weapons and shields on the wall through the eyes of Jedda, whose gaze we follow as she concentrates. The piece of western classical music that she is playing slowly contradicts the chanting and clicking of clap sticks, until she is seen hammering the piano keys in frustration. The hammering can also be read as Jedda being overcome with confusion or passion. The images that Chauvel uses to exemplify this are shown through Jedda's own eyes and her own body. She forms the central motif in the shot and it is through her eyes that the camera shows the slowly changing images of the Aboriginal weapons and shields.

The reading of the scene is dependant on Jedda's performance of hysteria, which is the only thing Chauvel denotes. The poignant montage in this scene does however underlie the conflict that Jedda senses as part of her identity and dramatises for the viewer the battle that has arisen within her. Semiologic analysis renders this montage to be what is referred to as a 'binary opposition', a patterning of textual elements in the film text in relation to paired oppositional units.

The textual elements of Jedda's piano playing in opposition to the slowly overpowering Aboriginal chants form classic dyads. Even if the image is separated from its soundtrack, it forms a similar binary oppositional structure. The conflict of the 'self' versus the 'Other' is apparent in Jedda's building frustration over what she believes to be the Aboriginal 'Other' of her identity. The importance of the conventions of dress as indices of 'civilisation' is made apparent, as is the construction of the affinity to nature of Aboriginal people. Chauvel narrows down space to three points or blocs of reference – the piano, the shield, and Jedda's body. The shield itself constructs the affinity to the 'primitive' self and Aboriginal music in the background as it starts to play while Jedda gazes fervently at it. Jedda sits at a piano dressed in so-called 'civilised dress' and yet is distracted by thoughts of returning to her 'primitive' self.

Everything happens in the scene according to a logic of 'split identity' (Morris, 1996) projected through dualisms. This logic is also organised by a scenario of heterosexual desire. Jedda's helpless dizziness at hearing an Aboriginal music 'inside' prepares for the scene in which she first sees Marbuk the 'unassimilated black man', but she is saved from it, temporarily, by the appearance at the door of Joe the 'assimilated man'.

Joe enters the room and asks Jedda if the "ghost of (her) tribe is chasing her with a big stick". He invites her to ride out with him to meet the returning Aboriginal tribe from its walkabout. In its intensely melodramatic emotional saturation, this scene is the most explicit allusion in the film to the white hysteria about race that possessed intellectuals and policy-makers from the late 19th century to the 1960s.

Later in the film a series of scenes which portray the influence of Marbuk upon Jedda further endorse the representation of 'primitive' images. The first of these involves Jedda asking one of the maids to explain to her how Marbuk might "sing" a girl to him. She is shown, as the narration of Joe comments, as being inducted into "the mysteries of the dark man's mating...the throb of the didgeridoo, what did it mean? Something she longed for, yet couldn't quite understand." This echoes the discourse of race that *Jedda* contains in the piano scene through a similar endorsement of the binarism in the construction of Aboriginal characters.

The discourse of race is carried forward through the piano scene right up to the meeting of Jedda and Marbuk. Jedda is supposed to marry Joe, the head stockman. Joe, we're told, is the son of an Afghan teamster and an Aboriginal woman, but he is identified, through his 'accent' on the soundtrack, as 'British'. In the historical reality to which the film alludes but could not name, Joe could just as plausibly have had a European father, perhaps Doug McMann himself. The piano scene is thus inserted between two dialogue scenes, Sarah/Jedda and Doug/Joe, in which a strong mother/daughter, father/son parallelism is formally set up – especially since all three scenes are about who or what has the power to determine Jedda's identity and her future. Her meeting with Marbuk immediately after sees a shift in this future. This is alluded to early on by Chauvel in his depiction of Jedda becoming increasingly fascinated by the 'primitive unassimilated' man.

Jedda is 'susceptible' to Indigenous 'influences' purely because of the fact that she feels them through her 'instincts' and 'nature'. Despite being subject to an almost exclusively white upbringing, her 'primitive' self beckons. This oppositional logic of binarism prompts her non-Aboriginal upbringing and character to be rendered an unmarked term, because it is the norm and taken as given. Her 'natural' 'primitive' Aboriginality however, is suppressed and excluded as an 'absent signifier' and is allowed to rise to the surface only to connote a destructive end, or at least an end that could have been avoided if Jedda had not allowed the thoughts of Marbuk to enter her mind. "The thoughts (that) started to weave a spell on the native mind of Jedda."

The deviance in this marked form of Aboriginality is made clear in the setting of the film and changes through the shift in shots from a comparatively civilised station to the wildlife on the campsite at the buffalo shoot. The transition is visually marked by camera shots of rifle fire disturbing the wildlife; fowl wheeling in the sky over swampy lagoons; Aboriginal women and children gathering plants and the violence of the mounted stockmen bringing down escaping buffalos. The nature of the montage marks a clear shift from the 'civilised' to the 'primitive' and 'savage'.

As discussed in the Methodology, stereotypical representations of Indigenous identity take place through the denotation of physical or cultural attributes of characters on screen. These depict 'types' rather than individuals and serve to reinforce certain stereotypical features of Indigenous identity, which is analysed further through the third character representation, that of Marbuk.

The scene of the returning Aboriginal tribe forms a crucial element in the plot, for it marks the entry of the 'wild Aboriginal'. Marbuk enters (Robert Tudawali), dressed in loincloth and carrying spears, and the shot makes him the focus of attention. The gaze of the viewer is slowly drawn over his natural dignity and fine physique. Jedda modestly lowers her eyes when he fixes her with an intense stare. This does not go unnoticed by Joe who tells Charcoal, the leader of the tribe, to make sure Marbuk "puts on trousers" when they reach the station. His 'primitive' 'natural' state leads to a level of discomfort.

Marbuk enquires about Jedda and is told by Charcoal that “she not your skin, wrong tribe for you, better watch out wild feller”. Marbuk answers him with a scornful laugh and this reflects the irony that is central in *Jedda*. Due to her black skin, Jedda is an outsider in white society, the society she has grown up to believe to be her own and only ‘salvation’. She is also now made unsuitable for Marbuk because of the restrictions of totemic exogamy. The connotation is one of Jedda being an assimilated outsider in not only her ‘adopted’ race, but also the race considered to be her ‘natural’ (Aboriginal) one.

They return to the cattle station where preparations are being made for the annual buffalo hunt. Doug McMann has already noted the unsettling presence of Marbuk and its impact on the station women. The camera follows Marbuk walking slowly past the Aboriginal women at the station, who watch him with intrigue and covetous glances, and retreat as it were from the ‘civilisation’ of the yard to the trees near the river. In the film’s terms he is inassimilable, and indeed a social outcast, indicated in simplest terms through his scorn for Doug’s simple request for him to put on trousers, which he never does, and thus remains ‘uncivilised’. This scorn is carried forward in all his actions through the movie including his ultimate abduction of Jedda.

When Jedda arrives with the McManns at the buffalo shoot campsite, the shot shows her falling silent as Marbuk fixes a brooding and piercing gaze on her. Her sleep at night is troubled and she creeps off to spy on Marbuk singing by the campfire where he squats sensuously with a python wrapped around his neck. The image is one of a body glistening in the flickering light. Marbuk has the potential to be a hero and villain (Malone, 1988:24), though his potential to be the hero is never really explored by Chauvel, who instead exploits the ‘savage’ and ‘primitive’ images associated with him. His ultimate degeneration in character from one of ‘proud hero’ to ‘kidnapping scoundrel’ is explicit in Chauvel’s treatment of his character.

Jedda is enticed to Marbuk’s campfire by his ‘tribal’ song, which ends with Jedda instinctively moving her limbs to the rhythm of his chants with a sexual intensity. It is Marbuk who is the catalyst for awakening Jedda’s yearning and need to return to

her 'Aboriginal ways' which is equated in the film as her need to also return to her sexual desires.

Jedda falls asleep near his campfire and upon awakening Marbuk sees her and smiles with triumph. He seizes her, throws a burning spear into the foliage near the horses and the ensuing chaos obscures Jedda's screams as Marbuk drags her off. Jedda is abducted from the camp and into the desert with Marbuk where she is sure, in all her assimilated sensibilities, to never survive. Marbuk as the embodiment of the 'noble savage' is now allowed to cinematographically dominate the film and the landscape. It is Marbuk who now introduces Jedda to the primitive way of life, which Jedda has never encountered before. He is the embodiment of the 'Other' and as such is allowed by Chauvel to dominate not only over Jedda, but dominate the landscape as well. The shift is seen most evidently when Marbuk stands over Jedda as they pass through a spectacular gorge. He towers over Jedda on their makeshift raft as if representative of a nomadic warrior savage who lives in a world of open spaces, red dust plains and impenetrable rock gorges. Marbuk is seen as the man who alone has an active sexuality and who alone satisfies it.

Chauvel constructs other characters in the film such as the ideal frontier female, Mrs McMann, by giving her no degree of sexuality or fondness for her husband. It is different in the case of Jedda who, being 'black', is allowed by Chauvel to have a sexual awakening and it is this which leads to her downfall when the only other sexual being in the film, Marbuk, sees her. In Chauvel's ideologically constructed outback world the whole aspect of sexual desire and awakening is concentrated on the Aboriginal characters.

The images are now of Jedda as she is harshly introduced to the 'primitive' life, a life which in reality is far from the life she envisioned in her daydreams. She is shown to resist eating a snake, for which Marbuk threatens to beat her. She falls into a creek and her clothes become threadbare, though never to a point to reveal indecency. The images suggest a girl lost in a world outside her reality. The life of the 'Other' is strongly connoted through depictions of Jedda's confusion and dismay at the 'primitive life' she is being exposed to by Marbuk. Marbuk, as an Aboriginal male,

is responsible for taking her away from the life she has known, and is shown to be the threatening 'Other'.

The viewer can sympathise with Jedda's conflict, and at the same time is given the space to also deride Marbuk for positioning her in it. Chauvel's treatment of his character as becoming increasingly degenerate facilitates this. Jedda is seen as being progressively less enamoured by Marbuk, more repulsed by him, and even contemplates escape when Marbuk fends off the crocodile she is menaced by.

At this point in the film a new element is introduced, that of the arrival of the mounted policeman at the station, who informs Doug McMann that he is tracking an escaped Aboriginal murderer. This turns out to be Marbuk. Marbuk is not allowed to be the sympathetic hero anymore. The connotations of the events on screen portray a man who it is reported is "in the habit of stealing lubras from the station blacks". His dignity, courage, and independence are gradually degenerated to a man who is uncontrollable and a criminal.

The camera now dwells on the lust Marbuk shows towards Jedda with lascivious looks bordering on sinister, as he watches Jedda become drowsy and reaches out his hand to her thigh. The harm that is built into his 'savagery' is now made clearly apparent to the viewer. The image cuts to the crackling and shimmering embers of the fire, as an on screen metaphor for human passions. Marbuk is the threatening Aboriginal 'Other' and as such, Chauvel ultimately does away with him. For even in a film Aboriginal culture must not be seen to triumph. It is part of Chauvel's ideological postulates of European Australia that Aboriginal culture has had its day and must be seen either as tamed, or dead.

The following day Marbuk and Jedda avoid their pursuers narrowly by climbing a steep rock face; their pursuers follow close behind. In a staged spear fight, Marbuk ambushes one of the pursuers and kills him. Even though he had used a rifle in the buffalo hunt, he sticks to his spears and is shown to abandon all remnants of 'civilisation' in favour of retaining Jedda. The film then traces their movement towards the land of Marbuk's people, his tribal lands. The landscape is stark and the raft passes between sheer cliffs of red sandstone, marking the sequence as visually

striking. The camera catches the play of rippling muscle as Marbuk moves the raft along. Jedda stands poised and motionless as a statue. The mise-en-scene within this shot of the movement of Marbuk as opposed to the stillness of Jedda mark the visual contrast between the two states of mind.

Frequent camera shots of the flight of Marbuk and Jedda are shown in long shot, emphasising the stark and obdurate rock faces, sometimes reducing the human figures to nearly out of sight. The use of these angles is to highlight the struggle and drama in the film's composition.

One graphic shot of Jedda's hand filling the screen as she gropes over a rock ledge searching for a handhold effectively encapsulates the plight of the Aboriginal people, groping for acceptance and a secure place of their own in what was once their own land. (Molloy, 1990: 140)

The dominance of the white settler coloniser on the landscape emphasises the theme of the inadequacy of Aboriginal aspirations in such a land which was once their own, perhaps connoted by Chauvel through the simple grasping hand of Jedda.

Ultimately, Marbuk and Jedda present a representational anomaly that must be done away with. They were doomed from the very beginning. The connotative markers throughout the film are of Marbuk's progressive degeneration to 'savagery'. In 1950s Australia, Aboriginal people had very little power in public policy, through assimilation practices. Marbuk was a crazy man towards the end because of his failure to realise that there was no power in his possession, neither from white society nor from his own tribe. Aboriginal law prevailed and it rejected him just as white law had. Marbuk's insanity might be implied throughout the film but it is made to punish Jedda as well, who is also killed off. The underlying irony and cynicism are apparent. The union of Marbuk and Jedda is shown to be objectionable to both white and Aboriginal sides.

The mise-en-scene within the film makes comment on the so-called benefits of 'civilisation' to Aboriginal people. Left untouched by the 'benefits' of assimilation, Marbuk's tribe is full of attractive women and smiling children, strong warriors whose bodies are adorned with ochre markings. There is no smouldering resentment

in their eyes, as it lurks in the eyes of Marbuk. Yet, there is an underlying pessimism, stemming from the tragic conclusion of the film.

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)

Chauvel's imagined models of race extend to Jedda and Marbuk, but their representation is constructed. They are not allowed to live because as signifiers, Chauvel makes them tell the story of a race which is doomed to extinction and has no choice but to submit to 'civilisation'. That this is the assimilated 'civilisation' of the cattle station is not directly indicated by Chauvel. The women and children squatting in the red dust between the iron shed at the Mongala station, the stockmen jumping in response to Doug McMann's yell to "stop yer yackering and get on with yer work" is only highlighted indirectly. This is the image of the assimilated Aboriginal people that the film portrays and their ultimate destruction is considered by Chauvel's filmic narrative to be their inevitable fate. The extermination of Aboriginality was the aim of assimilation. It simply meant the absorption of Aboriginal culture by European culture without working for social and economic equality and mutual enrichment between the two cultures.

*Jedda* ends with Joe's rhetorical narrative: "was it right to expect that Jedda, one of a race so mystic and so removed, should be of us in one short lifetime? The Pintaris whisper that the soul of Jedda now flies in the lonely plains and the mountain crags with the wild geese, and that she is happy with the great mother of the world in the dreamtime of tomorrow."

Chauvel had identified an area in Australian film that he felt was missing and perhaps should be presented to his fellow countrymen. Unfortunately this was an area that was intangible in the selective traditions of Australian history. These



selective traditions in history had no place in the 1950s for examinations of Aboriginal life and culture. The view of Aboriginal culture in *Jedda* might have been that of inferiority and stereotype, but it was a view, which was presented onscreen to an audience nonetheless, in a time known for its lack of such subject matter.

The tragic impact of white culture upon Aboriginal culture was a theme running through the film, which was identified and presented to an audience who found the film neither popular nor entertaining. *Jedda* was a success in terms of being the first Australian film to be exhibited at the Cannes Film Festival receiving considerable critical acclaim, but it was not economically successful in Australia. This was perhaps the result of a widespread, if unconscious, reluctance of Australian audiences to attempt to take a serious view of the Aboriginal situation. Audiences could accommodate a view of Aboriginal people stereotyped as being inferior and hence justify their dispossession, but the emphasis on the tragic impact of white colonisation remained unpalatable.

Today, it is easy to agree with Langton that “*Jedda* is sickening, and at the same time, laughable in its racism” (Langton, 1993:45). As Jennings points out, Chauvel’s representation of Northern Territory pastoral life ignored the dual oppressions of exploitation and atrocities inherent in racism. These were manifested in the mistreatment of Aboriginal cattle workers and their families, and their appalling living conditions. What it merely succeeded in presenting was the reinforcement of the widespread Eugenics theory of 1950s Australia. This was developed into a full national program of ‘social engineering’. Its goal was to achieve what was considered to be the ‘Australian way of life’. In this, inherent Aboriginal identity was to be superseded by a need to conform to the ‘ideal’ set by the colonisers, where all must aspire to be ‘worthy’ individuals (Haebich & Delroy, 1999:42).

## Chapter 12: Continuations – *Night Cries*

There is little doubt that *Jedda* in the first viewing is a striking film owing to all the images it imposes on the audience. However its impact is really felt when one delves deeper into the metaphors it represents. “This is not a straightforward narrative, nor realism, but an over-stated style more akin to the poses and stances of grand opera” (Malone, 1988:23). In a post-modernist sense this ‘grand opera’ could be seen as a grand theorising of Aboriginal questions; a theorising which eventually fell short of its objective: true representation. The analysis in this thesis undoubtedly benefits from the post Stolen Generation discourse, which was unavailable at the time *Jedda* was made.

It is then easier to understand the unresolved representational complex Chauvel presents in *Jedda* as a ‘true representation’. If the historical discourses of child separations and assimilation identified today were available to Chauvel, would the question of ‘truth’ have arisen in a questioning of *Jedda*? The answer to an alternate view of these discourses overlooked by Chauvel comes in part from Tracey Moffatt in *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990).

Born to an Aboriginal mother on a mission outside Brisbane and taken away and placed in foster care at an early age, Moffatt and her siblings lived the Assimilationist policies. As a result Moffatt grew up with the influences of both Aboriginal and white cultures. The “post colonial hybridisation” (Mellencamp, 1994:133) generated by these historical and culturally structured intersections comprise often the subject matter and creative strategy of much of Moffatt’s filmmaking. Moffatt exhibits as a photographer, and along with her feature film *Bedevil* (1993) she has made several other short films including *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) and *Heaven* (1997).

Moffatt herself expresses that *Night Cries* is universal and that:

it isn't particularly about black Australia and white Australia. It's about a child being moulded and repressed – she is very sexually repressed. It could be the story of anyone stranded in the middle of the desert having to look after their ageing mother. (Murray, 1990:22)

At the same time it has often been viewed as encapsulating “a powerful story; a story about the history of white/Aboriginal relations, with special reference to *Jedda*; a comment on human loneliness, ageing, existential angst...” (Kaplan, 1989: 14). Viewed in terms of its cultural specificity the film plays with conceptions of black and white relations, allowing the viewer to identify the Aboriginal woman, for a moment, as perhaps hired help for the aged white woman. This analysis looks at both aspects of the film’s readings: its universal and Aboriginal dimensions, highlighted through the child/parent relationship of the former, and the Aboriginal daughter’s relation to her white mother of the latter.

The core of the film’s exploration revolves around the mother/daughter relationship, which was previously sidelined in Moffatt’s reference point, *Jedda*. It writes a part of the story that *Jedda* obliterated. Moffatt’s intention was to pursue the relationship with the mother, complex and full of interest, which Chauvel never extended.

Moffatt’s work at first impresses on the viewer, as a study on the demise of ‘living’. An ancient white mother (Agnes Hardwick) waits to die, while her middle aged Aboriginal daughter (Marcia Langton) looks after her. Despite this morbid subject, the viewer soon transcends to an awareness of the absorbing aliveness of the film, evoked entirely through sound and minimal dialogue. The aliveness of the film is rendered through the sounds of the howling wind, the crack of the stock whip wielded by the daughter, the seaside waves crashing against the rocks, the playful squeals of the young Aboriginal kids. These fill up the lacunae or spots of indeterminacy, the ‘missing’ parts of the texts, caused by the intentional lack of dialogue, but not affected adversely by it.

Unlike *Jedda*, this film is inscribed with memory more than dialogue. There are the old family photos, an abandoned railway platform and flashbacks to childhood. The flashbacks indicate a reliving of the past in the present. They contrast the primal experience of loss. In the past the daughter acutely felt the loss of her mother when she disappeared from the rock; while now in the present, her mother is always *present*. These function as subtle and cumulative references in the frame to suggest a “powerful sense of a past beyond the frame of the present” (Jennings, 1993: 74).

There is a shared but unequal dependency that Moffatt alludes to. The changing dynamic is one from mother as carer to the daughter as carer. This dependency is strongly entrenched in the emotional dependency of the white mothers on their Aboriginal daughters, and vice versa, which is seen more intensely in *Night Cries* after a viewing of *Jedda*.

There is the ever grinning face of Aboriginal pop singer Jimmy Little, who incants the comforts of calling upon God through a “royal telephone” when you “get in trouble”. Little himself is equated as being ‘the first’ Aboriginal pop star. Moffatt’s use of Jimmy Little miming ‘Love Me Tender, Love Me Do’ during the scene when the daughter is cracking the whip is unsettling and despite the grin, or perhaps because of it, is even macabre.

Little is also part of an ‘unsettling’ cultural history in a broader sense. He is an evangelical Christian, who has been part of a transformation of Aboriginal religious life. This transformation has formed a major part of his artistic work, thus juxtaposing his role as an artist with that of the role of art in society. Little’s presence is fluctuated in the film and his image is cut in and out of scenes, effectively silencing his voice and releasing it again in fragments. His presence is “like something familiar which turns into something horrible” (Murray, 1990: 22). The question of what Jimmy Little is doing in this film remains unclear. How does his role as the male but somehow non-sexual third dimension intervening between mother and daughter frame the film? Jayamanne speculates that Little mediates the public history that joins the private lives of mother and daughter and “with style and panache he embodies cultural assimilation” (Jayamanne, 1993: 78).

For Jennings the lyrics of Little’s song ‘Royal telephone’ elicit reminders of mission schools and their spiritual imperialism. “The lyrics of the song are particularly fatuous and their glib theme of communication functions in ironic counterpoint to the themes of loneliness, isolation and estrangement which are central to the film” (Jennings, 1993: 74). Moffatt thus alludes to the assimilation views, seen in *Jedda*’s narrative, and tries to bring into *Night Cries* the images of Aboriginality and the culture of assimilation she herself grew up in. Jimmy Little hence plays a crucial role in the representation of the unsettling assimilation history in a broader sense and

the location of an assimilated Aboriginal individual within the film text. His 'sound' is an index of how today the position of Aboriginality has altered, even if in many ways it hasn't changed at all. He embodies cultural assimilation, involving imitation in camouflage, the point at which others are not able to tell if you are there or not, and working in a "tradition which is not his but which he sings as his own" (Jayamanne, 1993: 78).

His presence seems to function as a "third term necessary to break the dyad of the mother and daughter..." (Jayamanne, 1993: 77). This dyad essentially provides Moffatt with opportunities to conjure up multiple images in the film. Immediately it is clear that there is ambivalence in the daughter's feelings towards her mother, even resentment mixed with her sense of care. Interestingly the seaweed wrapped around the child turns into videotape, perhaps symbolising the constriction and suffocation felt by the daughter of having to stay at home.

The almost repellent image of the infirm old white woman, with her sinewed and grizzled features, emphatically moves the viewer. It is hard not to be affected by her plight, especially in the opening shot of her hand, braced fingers reaching for the food remains on the table. As the exasperated daughter takes her several times a day to the outside tin-shed toilet, one can't help but be terrified at her decaying physical state. This visual insistence is shocking in Australian culture "where death, old age and bodily decrepitude hardly figure so forcefully in the cinema" (Jayamanne, 1993: 80).

The sight of the vulnerable and feeble woman allows Moffatt to invert colonial history and play out the worst fantasy of white parents who adopted Aboriginal children in the hope of 'civilising' them. Perhaps the worst nightmare for these parents "is to end life with the black adoptive child as the only family, the only one who cares" (Langton, 1993: 47). The audience, like the middle aged Aboriginal woman, wait for her mother to die. In the end when she finally does, Moffatt presents the daughter's grief powerfully through the aerial shot of the two lying "foetally curled around one another" (Kaplan, 1993: 16).

The landscapes in the background are meant to recall the paintings of Albert Namatjira, an Aboriginal artist of the Aranda watercolour school, who painted in a style quite unlike western desert painting. This was not the only art he painted, but it was probably by 1935 that Namatjira made his first watercolour paintings and reached the height of his 'popular' fame in the 1950s, culminating in his presentation to the Queen in 1954. Namatjira was not the first Aboriginal artist to paint natural landscapes in a European style, but he did become singularly famous for it. The government took an interest in promoting him as a 'star' of cultural assimilation – living evidence that the policy could work. The reasoning was that if an Aboriginal artist could learn to paint 'accurately', i.e., though European perspective conventions, then they could and *should* become European. It seems no accident that Moffatt makes reference to both Little and Namatjira, making her film not only about the politics of imitation and assimilation, but also more significantly about an "aesthetics of assimilation" (Jayamanne, 1993: 76). Namatjira's work heavily inspires the colour and lighting in the film.

By recalling Jimmy Little and Albert Namatjira, Tracey Moffatt is "making an *enabling* tradition for herself to work in" (Jayamanne, 1993: 76). This tradition allows for greater freedom of film production for herself as well as others. Roland Barthes considered the role of the spectator/reader as central, shifting emphasis from the interpretations of the director, to the creatively inclined and active viewer (Barthes, 1977). Moffatt's work plays to this and the text of her film is never fixed. Her filmmaking approach requires the viewer not merely to watch the film, but also to analyse, interpret, respond to and actively construct the film text, thus setting up the enabling tradition.

Barthes (1985), when analysing the question of meaning and its reading, described the spectator's role as 'producer', where the image viewed is polysemeous; a 'floating chain' of signified which can be selected or ignored by the reader. Tracey Moffatt's presented images are intentionally polysemeous. From this polysemy Moffatt succeeds in questioning the descriptions and *modus operandi* of society in which the audience is situated. The referential content in Moffatt's work is simultaneously present and absent, throwing it open to be selected or ignored. The presence of Namatjira and Little in the film can be actively selected or ignored by the

viewer. It is absent because in her work there is an element of fabrication, which does not claim to reflect exterior reality, which can be related to the 'physical' look of the film. It is an obviously artificial film set, and Moffatt does nothing to disguise this fact. It is present because these referential contents evoke certain precise situations (Snelling, 1999: 11). Its polysemic signs and referents, like Namatjira and Little, are consciously placed in the narrative to intercede reality and fiction. Such a floating chain of signified facilitate an oblique portrait of contemporary Australian national identity and the staging of 'urban Aboriginal culture'.

Through Moffatt's grounding in *Night Cries* of the history of Aboriginal subjugation, intersecting "historical and psychic representations within which to explore race and gender" (Kaplan, 1993: 17), *Jedda's* one-dimensional colonial discourse is put to questioning. This is the grounding that Moffatt provides in *Night Cries* where she subjects the Assimilation policy to the temporality of the influence of the government policy on everyday domestic life and its consequences. Moffatt puts the domestic at the core of the relationship rather than grand events. Langton's muted performance of gasping for air is more restrained than the crisis that Chauvel extracted from Kunoth. Moffatt allows a radical reshaping in the audience's mind "leaving the viewers with structures which go beyond their consciousness prior to viewing. They then have a tool with which to re-evaluate that which they had previously accepted as 'natural'" (Lesage, 1974: 15). The burden of history is felt to reside in the muted responses of Langton in *Night Cries* rather than grand colonial discourses.

The narrative in *Night Cries* is from the daughter's point of view, whereas in *Jedda*, it was Joe who 'spoke', silencing Jedda and excluding her from her own story, reinforcing her objectification. The fact that all the men have been left out of the narrative suggests an understanding by Moffatt of the paradigms of gender implicitly missing from *Jedda* and her specific intention is to focus on the mother/daughter dyad. What Moffatt forces the audience to think about is a reconstruction of the lives of Jedda and Sarah McMann, which instead of being mediated by men, are now entirely their own. The camera follows the daughter's gaze as she looks at objects within the homestead and off into her memories. This subject positioning is directly opposite to Chauvel's *Jedda*, in which despite her central role, Jedda "becomes under

the white gaze imagining the Aboriginal, the object” (Langton, 1993: 40). This is the notion of the white film gaze, which objectifies and disempowers Aboriginal characters in the text. Moffatt presents the daughter as the ‘subject’ in her film, ascribing her with the power to present a personalised and feminine perspective.

Moffatt’s Aboriginal origin forms a part of her history, thus providing her with the ability to use her personalised gaze as a vehicle for all kinds of questioning in the film. In an interview with Gerald Matt, Moffatt herself describes the images presented within the film as so personal that a “lot of the time they embarrass me. I’m always saying: Oh my God, don’t make me watch *Night Cries* again! For me the film is deep and it probably has something to do with my relationship with my mother - the love, the hate” (Matt, 1999: 66).

*Night Cries* is read by Langton as an anti-colonial reconstruction of *Jedda* (Langton, 1993: 23). While *Jedda* prescribed to the racial theory that race predetermines identity, seen in Jedda’s desire to go ‘walkabout’, partake in the corroboree, and be seduced by Marbuk’s Aboriginal ‘sorcery’- the daughter’s desires in *Night Cries* transcend matters of racial identity. She longs to escape the harsh desert environment and her repressive existence and dreams of train journeys, little black dresses and island resorts (Morris, 1996: 19). The strain on her, however, is portrayed much the same as it was for Jedda. The daughter in *Night Cries* does not hear only two kinds of music, as Jedda did in the piano scene. She hears all kinds of songs and sounds and cries, including the train as she lies with her mother’s body on the platform.

Moffatt forces the viewer to hypothesize: What if Jedda had not chosen Marbuk? What if she had not chosen Joe either? What if she had chosen to stay at home with her mother? What if all the hopes of Sarah’s assimilationist viewpoint had worked and kept Jedda at home, away from her people? Keeping these questions open and yet enabling the viewer to answer them subtly through the narrative, moves *Night Cries* away from being purely an extension or “intertext” (Jayamanne, 1993: 82) of *Jedda*. Audiences who have never watched *Jedda* can still appreciate Moffatt’s message. This message resonates with the powerful “strength and *thereness* of the



Aboriginal daughter” (Kaplan, 1993: 16). It is a statement on the fortitude and resilience of the daughter.

In *Night Cries* the rural homestead of *Jedda* has changed. The windows are patched and grimy and Moffatt has contracted the “place for settlement” (Periz, 1990: 16). In *Jedda* the pebbled path which led from the house to the gates of the cattle sheds, barns, and stockyards has been replaced by Moffatt to a pebbled path which leads to a toilet with a huge external bolt, uncannily looking like a prison confine. The world of the women in *Jedda* was mainly confined to the interior, while the exteriors offered the frontier action, drama, and generic adventure. Moffatt inverts this in *Night Cries* to the domestic interior becoming the ‘frontier’, not of two radically different cultures, but one where the impact of state policy is felt on the psyche of both Aboriginal and white women in a continuous long-lasting effect.

Moffatt is not interested in narrative per se. Her film does not intend to tell a story, as did *Jedda*. Rather it is a sensitively crafted tour across diverse symbolically laden areas of space. The otherwise banal objects and activities, which the camera focuses on, force the viewer to contemplate them. Moffatt transforms the otherwise simplistic narrative to a haunting and open-ended statement. Ultimately Moffatt’s narrative is not about appeal, it is about strength. Moffatt herself describes the faces of the women in *Night Cries* as representing “something that I know, that I must think I know” (Fusco, 2000: 134). It speaks to the viewer of the familial ties that bind in broad yet layered terms and opens up space where “the slow process of healing the wounds of the past, of imagining new Australian ‘faces’ can perhaps begin” (Kaplan, 1993: 17).

To summarise, *Night Cries* matches media images with historical markers. It is difficult to imagine the history of Aboriginal/white relations by recalling European image-makers, such as Chauvel’s, representations of Aboriginal cultures. This is because Chauvel’s history was inverted in relation to the policies dominant at the time. Hence Moffatt’s work tries to engage in a dialogue with this inversion of history, to mediate *Jedda* with Aboriginal images. The race relations that Moffatt refers to are contrasted directly with those presented by Chauvel.

Moffatt's film not only refers to 1950s Australian domestic culture but also the work of three mediators of culture at that time: Charles Chauvel, Jimmy Little, and Albert Namatjira. A viewing of *Jedda* reminds us how Aboriginal history has been represented through a form of stereotyping that falls neatly into what Langton identifies as "creating Aboriginality" (Langton, 1993: 31). Moffatt's work encourages a revision of inherited images, such as those seen in Chauvel's *Jedda*. It also encourages creations of Aboriginality through collective and public ways.

### Chapter 13: Transitions - *Walkabout*

There are few films which have been considered to change the very template of Australians' iconic sense of the Outback. *Walkabout* is viewed by many to be one such film. For most Australians the images of the Outback are forbidding and empty, resilient and unchanging: brutal sun, baked earth, cloudless blue skies, corrugated iron shacks, severe rocky outcrops, and the myriad strange lizards and snakes. The Outback, whether ventured into or not, is present in the poetry, novels, and paintings of the country. "It seems to Australians that only the stoic survive its [the Outback's] rigours and they do so merely by enduring, not by trying to impose their will on the land. The Outback is both a real place and a crucial part of Australian mythology" (Nowra, 2003: 3).

*Walkabout* was one of the films featuring the Outback released in 1971; the other being *Wake in Fright*. At the time of their release, the Australian cinematic world of the 1970s had produced only occasional feature films, viewed by small audiences. "In fact there was no movie industry. Occasional films- spasmodic interruptions to the general lethargy- weren't popular and many Australians avoided them" (Nowra, 2003: 4). The once flourishing Australian film industry had dwindled. The 1969 documentary *The Pictures That Moved* was considered to be a grim reminder of past film achievements (Reade, 1978). Films produced after that period were infrequent and mostly made by foreign directors. After the works of pioneering Australian film directors such as Ken G. Hall and Charles Chauvel, films produced in Australia from the 1960s onwards were increasingly being made by foreign directors such as Fred Zinnemann's *The Sundowners* (1960), Michael Powell's *They're A Weird Mob* (1966), and Tony Richardson's *Ned Kelly* (1970).

*Walkabout* conformed to this trend by being directed by an English director, Nicolas Roeg. Ironically it was *Walkabout* and *Wake in Fright* that were credited with "marking the re-emergence of Australian filmmaking and inspiring further production...[and] although neither were directed by Australians, their specific settings and casts helped to re-establish the technical support for the Australian industry" (Rayner, 2000: 25). In the historical context of the Australian cinematic world of the 1970s a representation of the Australian Outback unmarked by non-

Aboriginal culture was not a widely explored image. The representation of Indigenous characters within a representation of 'real life' was even less. *Walkabout* thus differed from any previously made film.

Roeg's directorial influences for *Walkabout* came from various sources. The editing style of Antony Gibbs in *Petulia* (1968), and his work as cinematographer in features like Roger Corman's *The Masque Of The Red Death* (1964) and John Schlesinger's *Far From The Madding Crowd* (1967), had a seminal influence on Roeg, and he employed Gibbs to work with him on *Walkabout*. Roeg had been attracted to James Vance Marshall's novel 'The Children' (1959) ever since he first read it when he was in Australia as camera operator on *The Sundowners*. The title was changed to 'Walkabout' when it was republished in 1961.

In 1967 Roeg's friend Denis O'Dell bought the rights to *Walkabout* for Roeg to direct as his first film. Roeg then approached the English playwright Edward Bond to write the screenplay for *Walkabout*. Bond was notorious for his 1965 play 'The Saved', in which the characters communicated not with phrases and sentences but in grunts, unintelligent utterances and exclamations. Yet gradually the rhythm of this language took on an arid beauty. It was this sparseness of language and poetic style that appealed to Roeg, along with Bond's lean narrative style (Nowra, 2003: 14).

Bond maintained that "in all my plays there are always two worlds...and my plays exploit the difference between the two worlds, taking the character from one world to another" (Koppen, 1997: 104). His attraction to parable and his ability to write fable-like plays thus cemented his suitability to write a story about two children who find themselves in an unknown environment. Roeg reports that:

he [Bond] said something which really struck me: he said, 'you know, I've been thinking about doing something about a journey.' And that openness seemed so perfect...with that one sentence, he showed that he was as open to the essence of it as the rest of us. (Danielsen, 1998: 16)

The screenplay had turned into the journey that would later characterise it as a genre. Bond's first attempt at the screenplay had no scenic detail, only dialogue. Despite

being cinematographically inclined, Roeg was ecstatic with the screenplay, which he later explained:

It wasn't the visual side of the book [that attracted me] at all. It was that here were two people- two people in effect, since the little boy acts as a chorus to the aborigine (sic) and the girl- who by this curious moment of fate were at a point where they could have been in love with each other. They have everything to offer each other, but they couldn't communicate and went zooming to their own destinies, through the odd placement of identity, the identity other people had put on them. (Milne and Houston, 1974: 7)

For Roeg then, the film script was a play that Bond had handed to him to represent the girl, her brother and the Aboriginal boy on screen. This analysis will centre around the theme of this 'odd placement of identity', especially for the Aboriginal boy.

*Walkabout* was a film that was almost never made. The financing fell through several times and to Roeg it seemed all too clear that *Walkabout* would never be made. Roeg had made twenty-five copies of the *Walkabout* screenplay, which he had sent out for financing, but with no success, until he had only one copy left. Roeg went on to direct *Performance* (1970) as his first film, and was in the process of editing it when *Walkabout* was given the green light to start filming. A story about two children helped by an Aboriginal boy in the Australian desert did not appeal to many financiers, a reflection of the lack of interest in the themes that *Walkabout* presented.

When the film was originally slated to be made, Roeg had settled for the role of the girl to be played by fourteen year old Jenny Agutter, who had acted in films since the age of twelve and had played the teenage daughter in *Star!* (1968). The two year wait for the start of film production meant that Agutter was now sixteen, which transformed both her and her character. Instead of the slightly sexless character, the girl was now, as Agutter described her in the 1998 DVD re-release of the film, "like myself...at that perplexing age between adolescence and adulthood." This lapse of time helped both director and actor to add another dimension to the character of the girl who was periodically bewildered by her own sexuality. Roeg's own son, Lucien

John, was suggested to play the little boy. Having travelled widely with his father, and used to being on film sets he had none of the affectation of many child actors and proved to be a good choice.

The most daunting task though, was the casting of the Aboriginal boy. He had to be a skilled Aboriginal dancer, have basic English language skills and some conception of what a movie was. The test for Roeg was to find an actor who would be able to understand direction and yet retain his 'authenticity'. In Australia of 1969, this was a hard task as there was no tradition in cinema of employing Aboriginal actors. Earlier Australian films had either employed non-professional actors, such as when Charles Chauvel chose two amateurs for the lead roles in *Jedda* (1955); or used non-Aboriginal actors, such as *Journey Out Of Darkness* (1967) where white actor Ed Devereaux was 'blackened' to play an Aboriginal police tracker and a Sri Lankan, Kamahl played the other Aboriginal character.

After arriving in Australia, Roeg flew up north to see David Gulpilil, who was erroneously and consistently called 'Gumpilil' in the credits and publicity. Gulpilil had spent the early years of his life in the bush and had attended a mission school, Maninggrida, in Arnhem Land. The previous year he had won the dance Eisteddfod in Darwin. He had been a member of a dancing troupe, with which he had toured overseas (Pike & Cooper, 1981) and had taught dance at his mission school (McFarlane, Mayer & Bertrand, 1999). His father was described by the newspapers as a nomad and his mother seemed to have vanished or died. He spoke his tribal language and his English was erratic, but at the mission he had been introduced to the movies and television. Roeg did a screen test in the bush and chose him for the part.

During his time up in the north, Roeg also scouted for possible locations for filming. Images of the outback, particularly those of Sidney Nolan's paintings of Burke and Wills riding to their doom on camels, were a recurrent theme that Roeg had immersed himself in back in England. The paintings reinforced the arid sense of desert Australia and this visualisation of the Outback had a compelling effect on the way Roeg filmed the landscape. Nolan's effect on Roeg was more explicitly incorporated into the film in the scene when the little boy, in a momentary vision,

sees bearded explorers crossing the desert on camels much like Burke and Willis in the paintings (Nowra, 2004).

The images of the Outback in the film formed an acute and intensive part of the film text and seemed in keeping with the fable-like story of two white children who find themselves lost in the desert. After their father's failed attempt at killing them and his own suicide thereafter, the children are left stranded. They are saved by a teenage Aboriginal boy who helps them survive. *Walkabout* is thus built around a simple story, "about life and being alive, not covered with sophistry but addressing the most basic human themes: birth, death, mutability" (Danielsen, 1998: 16).

It is also 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 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.

This could partially be explained by the fact that when *Walkabout* was released, it was amidst an influx of 'ocker' films such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) and *Stork* (1971). These types of films relied on forms of social typing rather than psychological motivations. It was the 'ocker' films that were geared for the local market and Australian general release. *Walkabout*, with its complex inter-sexual and inter-racial relationships, did not easily fit into the 'ocker' mould. Rather, *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 ahead of its time.

Hence the film lacked immediate local commercial success, despite the fact that it made an impact overseas and acquired a cult following in England and the United States (Malone, 1988: 31). This lack of local success could also be explained by the

parochial concerns about the white Australian characters in the film, who some thought made Australians look like ‘crude boors’ (Strange, 1971), sparking concerns that Australian audiences felt ‘ashamed’ of the way they were being portrayed.

It also provoked a controversy over whether it was an Australian production, arising out of practical concerns when the producers planned to enter it into the Cannes Film Festival as an official Australian entry. “Walkabout is not really an Australian film at all. It demonstrates so completely an outsider’s response to Australia...Walkabout is no simple celebration of the landscape. It is a reaction to it” (Rattigan, 1991: 308). Hence opponents of it claimed that the only thing Australian about *Walkabout* was its setting. Otherwise, barring a few technicians it was an entirely British production (Thornhill, 1971). Ultimately, the Australian National Film Board rejected its status as an Australian film and it was sent as a British entry at Cannes.

The film had a somewhat variable critical reception. On the one hand it was viewed as a sentimentalised version of the ‘noble savage’ image (Feineman, 1978), because of its stereotypical portrayal of the Aboriginal boy. On the other hand it was regarded as being Roeg’s most accessible and affecting film (Wright, 1976; Izod, 1980). “If it lacks the density of Roeg at his best, it is certainly a photographic *tour de force* and perhaps still his most moving, humane film” (Sinyard, 1991: 28). It is also regarded as almost a religious parable and a childhood film on par with its nearest contemporary classic, Francois Truffaut’s *L’Enfant Sauvage* (1969). Hence differing levels of appeal and response seemed to be an essential part of the film’s style, as it strove to convey the tangle and texture of modern life.

Despite the myriad of responses to *Walkabout* very few critics praised the film’s imagery, rather they saw it in a literal way. “If the film plays with some familiar antithesis (noble savage and corrupt society, paradise lost and urban hell), it gains in power from the fact that these are presented as images rather than ideas” (Dawson, 1971: 228). Roeg’s work through images then contextualises visual connections and visual assemblages, which this thesis refers to as being purely a part of the cinematic experience, rather than through the sense of literary sensibility emphasising cause and effect as written on paper. As an explication of semiotic representations on



screen, *Walkabout* offers the analysis in this thesis images in celluloid of layers of contrasting connotations and juxtapositions.

The caption at the beginning of the film reads:

In Australia when an Aborigine man-child reaches 16 he is sent out into the land. For many months he must live from it. Sleep on it. Eat of its fruits and flesh. Stay alive. Even if it means killing his fellow creatures. The Aborigine calls it the walkabout. This is a story of a walkabout. (*Walkabout*, 1971, transcribed from film)

According to Roeg's commentary on the 1998 re-release DVD version of the film, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox had added this caption card, which Roeg was dismissive of, although he nonetheless used in the re-release. Roeg dismissed it because it brought to mind definitions of a 'walkabout' which were inherently flawed. Originally, the term had disparaging overtones, as Aboriginal people who went on 'walkabout' temporarily abandoned their employment, homestead, or mission to go to traditional, spiritual places. Hence for most Australians 'walkabout' simply implied the abandoning of responsibility, rather than a return to Aboriginal responsibilities. It is ironic that the term 'walkabout', as a European term referring to the Aboriginal custom of leaving the homestead, was used to portray the journey the children undertake in the movie where their saviour is an Aboriginal boy.

Once the 'walkabout' the movie is trying to portray is elaborated, the caption becomes more than just an explanation of the title, but it also connotes a sense of what is about to be shown is a question of life and death, illustrated in the melodramatic phrase 'the killing of fellow creatures'. The question audiences are asked from the beginning of the film narrative is one of survival in the harsh Outback, and perhaps survival of a culture alien to the contrasting urban scene. More importantly, once the definition of walkabout is known, audiences are "prepared for a different sort of movie, something exotic rather than plot driven, featuring a rare character in movies-the Australian Aborigine" (Nowra, 2003: 24). As the simple credits roll through, they are underscored by harsh, metallic music and the tones of a didgeridoo. The first scene that audiences are confronted with after the exposition of this 'walkabout' is a brick wall and a scene in the city. Audiences

expect to see the Outback or Aboriginal people, instead the camera tracks past the wall and a city is revealed.

This analysis hence begins where the film begins, with a discussion of the disjointed and fast moving montage of 'modern' urban life. Geometric patterns of concrete give way to shots of traffic jams, crowds, ground kangaroo meat in plastic wrapping, and rows of schoolgirls sitting in their school desks and panting in unison. Next, a boy (Lucien John Roeg) on his way home from school leaves the sidewalk and enters a park, at which point Roeg switches to a wide angled lens, giving the greenery a distorted, unnatural and artificial appearance. Although the trees are healthy, each wears a botanical name tag as if they are artefacts in a living museum and no longer part of the natural world. These images which connote to the viewer how much order has been imposed on nature by white man, sets up the scene in a way where viewers are not surprised that although the children's apartment is right next to the ocean, they swim in a man made pool complex built right next to the water.

The connotation of the images of the city people also divorces them not just from nature but from each other as well. They are never seen socialising or laughing or playing, but are always shown as anonymous components of sullen crowds. When the father (John Meillon) returns home from work, he does not greet his wife or children, but just stares at her and reprimands them, to tell them not to "chew with [their] mouths open" or to turn the radio down. His commands are conveyed through hostile glares rather than through his words.

The urban montages are edited to be disjointed, confusing, and unrelated except by the themes of anonymity and perpetual motion. Cars and people move at a rapid pace, giving them and the audience little time to disentangle sensory impressions. In the desert however, Roeg uses a more fluid, relaxed style of shots and editing.

In contrast to the earlier urban scenes, the desert scenes are shot with allowances for freeze frames, dissolves, and slow motion, all of which lend a lyrical quality to the natural beauty of the environment and contrast heavily with the fragmented and hectic scenes of the city. "At one level the Australian landscape appears as the ultimate blank slate, unmarked by (non-Aboriginal) culture and antithetical to human

encroachment” (Rayner, 2000: 26). It is also treated as a beautiful but stark wasteland, in essence represented as the ‘true Australia’, which the city scenes only seem to encroach upon.

Nonetheless, even though the city seems cold and structured and drab, with the concrete and the crowds, it still seems more inviting than images of the barren desert, endlessly brown and filled with sand, lizards, and snakes. The children in *Walkabout* do not enter this desert by choice of their own free will, or with preparation. Their father drives them out and tries to shoot them, presumably out of a sense of hopelessness, despair, or lack of meaning to his life, and when he fails, he kills himself and burns the car. The children are now driven deeper into the wilderness where the flora and fauna are alien and threatening.

From the beginning of their confrontation with the desert, both children react differently. The boy is younger and less socialised and acts poorly and childishly at first. He lacks discipline and an awareness of the dangers in the desert. He quickly becomes irritable and discouraged. He pretends to be too exhausted to walk and tricks his sister, who is equally exhausted, into carrying him. The older, more mature sister (Jenny Agutter) makes a noble attempt at returning them to so-called ‘civilisation’ and the rituals of life they know and are familiar with. She thinks of games to keep her brother moving and tries to remain optimistic. She responds to the gravity of their plight through resourcefulness, by using a rock to open a can of cherries, seeking high ground to search for lights, and remembering an old uncle’s story about how he licked salt when he was lost in the desert. Despite her courage and selflessness, she is no match for the desert. The environment is unfamiliar to them and they have no way of knowing that the oasis they reach at a later point in the film will dry up overnight or that the birds will eat all the fruit while the children sleep. Hence regardless of her mental fortitude, she is not equipped to cope with the desert and cannot be expected to survive alone. Later, with the introduction of the Aboriginal boy (David Gulpilil) the children gradually learn how exactly to utilise Aboriginal knowledge of the land.

The next point of analysis considers how Roeg makes binary oppositional comparisons between urban 'civilisation' and the more 'primitive' Aboriginal society through imperceptible differences encapsulated in the dislocation of music and image throughout the film's exposition. The radio the children salvage from the car serves as a constant reminder of civilisation's priorities, with programmes such as: "Hospital Requests", advice on reactions to a situation when a fish fork is not provided, prayers for Armistice Day, and strange disjointed comments such as "after ten thousand years of trial and suffering...[do not expect that] there might at last be a perpetual succession of comfortable shopkeepers." The radio in the background constantly connotes the triviality of western society's concerns as if "the thousands of years of human development are at once inconsequential, in the endless repetition of communal behaviour and hierarchical structure" (Rayner, 2000: 26). The character of humanity and its 'advances' are portrayed as both trivial and ridiculous when contrasted with the timeless land, indifferent towards human intrusion. Roeg's dislocation of the radio reports, music, and static evoke a lyricism rather than a coherent narrative.

At the same time the character of western society and its advances are also connoted as being vicious and a menace. Roeg's use of the butcher in two separate scenes bears such a connotation of the violence of modern society as well as an underlying binary opposition between the 'civilised' and 'primitive'. At the beginning of the film, a butcher prepares meat which has been sanitised, sectioned, and ground. The final product bears little or no resemblance to the animal it was. The butcher forms one of the parts in the complicated chain involved in bringing 'modern man' his food. The Aboriginal boy is shown to kill and clean the kangaroo himself and uses every part of the animal; for food, tools, and even its entrails to heal Peter's sunburn. In a later scene when the Aboriginal boy separates the meat from the tendons of the kangaroo he has just speared, Roeg intercuts to another urban butcher who is making chops from a larger section of meat. The fragmentation of modern 'civilisation' is contrasted with the simplicity and self-sufficiency of Aboriginal living. At the end of the movie, the girl is once again shown as using pre-packaged meat, and adhering to 'civilisations' fragmented process.

The scene where the three children play in the trees also make this 'civilisation' versus 'primitive' binary apparent. The girl tells her brother to give the Aboriginal boy one of his toy soldiers and says, "I expect he'd like to play. He's never had toys of his own". The Aboriginal boy uses the trees and natural environment as his toys, but this is lost on the two children and on audiences as well who expect children to play with wooden soldiers, fake guns, or model airplanes.

While the children play in the trees, Roeg cuts to an Aboriginal group who have discovered one of 'civilisation's toys', the burnt out car of the father. They are shown to be enjoying crawling in and out of the car. However their game is short-lived because of the intrusion of 'civilisation' in the form of the car radio. They accidentally turn on the car radio which scares them away from the car with its disembodied sounds. Before the radio frightens the Aboriginal group away however, they discover the decomposing body of the father. Rather than leave him lying on the ground, they hang his body from a tree, where they believe it will be safe. This simple respect for another living being connotes a dignity in Aboriginal society, more so than the supposed 'advanced' society, connoted in the beginning of the film with the insanity of the father, and later the mistreatment of the children by the man in the mining town and the carnage of the hunters.

The most sophisticated of Roeg's condemnations of civilisation is connoted in the movie by the use of freeze frames in three different but related sequences. Through these:

Roeg is illustrating how cinema, a pure idea of cinema that goes back to Eisenstein's montage technique, is not like words or paintings. It enters another realm of the imagination where events and time can collide and interact in a way impossible in any other art form. (Nowra, 2003: 44)

Various scenes are juxtaposed and tenuous connections between them are left unresolved, leaving audiences to engage in the images actively rather than overpowering collections of striking images.

The first such montage is used when the Aboriginal boy stalks and kills the kangaroo. As he spears the animal, Roeg freezes the shot, and when the kangaroo dies he shifts to a high grain film stock as if to document the moment of death. This gives the moment a strange dignity because it is shown to be a fact of life rather than something that is vulgar to the audience. The animal's death does not disturb the other animals and there are no shrieks of pain and terror, which conforms to the idea that the Aboriginal boy is acting in harmony with nature. To emphasize this ecological necessity, Roeg cuts back to the city where the butcher is making chops. Unlike the Aboriginal boy the butcher is removed from a natural setting with none of the Aboriginal aura of self-sufficiency and balance with nature.

Roeg uses freeze frames again at the science station when a red balloon unexpectedly appears out of nowhere, later explained by the presence of a meteorological research team. This research team is composed of six men and one woman who are not defined by their function, but rather by the men's sexist reactions. They are oblivious to their surroundings and the demands of their research and are shown to be interested only in the movements of the woman's body. As the woman crosses her legs, accompanied by music very much like that used by Fellini, the men turn in unison to leer and grin, captured in a freeze frame. She then buttons and unbuttons her shirt while the men crane their necks to catch a glimpse of her breasts, and once again the frame of their expressions is frozen, which captures their sordid attitude and unflattering expressions. It connotes trained scientists rendered oblivious to their surrounding environment by their preoccupation with sex, indirectly related to 'civilisation's' fixation with sexual obsessions. This is reminiscent of the triviality of the concerns of modern society as connoted by the earlier scenes of the disjointed radio commentary. The denunciation of 'civilisation' is connoted subtly through the frivolity of the station members and their continuing ignorance of their surroundings and environment.

The third and final set of freeze frames by Roeg shows the final confrontation between 'civilised' and 'primitive' man. When the Aboriginal boy, the girl, and her brother find the abandoned house, the Aboriginal boy explores the land around it. While in the field he watches the indiscriminate gunning down of countless animals. With each shot herds of animals and birds flee documenting the futility of escape.

To highlight this defencelessness, Roeg uses high-grained film stock and slow motion. Unlike the kangaroo killing sequence there is no dignity, and the death of the water buffalo becomes painful and ugly. Roeg follows the killing of the buffalo with a close-up shot of the dead animal's head crawling with ants and maggots, thus emphasizing the process of horror in the minds of the audience.

These three freeze frame sequences form an intricately structured comment on the repressive power that modern society has over its people and on the non-ecological capacity for mindless destruction that modern 'civilisation' exhibits. They connote a politicised direction of the attitudes of 'civilisation' forging a new alternative for the audience, where the viewer is cultivated to form a more omniscient, disinterested, and ironic resignation of the events on screen and their reactions to these events. Roeg provides no options for the encroachment of 'civilisation' other than an Aboriginal culture which was alien to most audiences at the time the movie was produced and to a certain extent even today.

Roeg's statement on the socialisation of the girl and their survival in the desert forms the first level of connotation analysed here. The girl brings no information on survival in the desert with her, however she retains her set of attitudes and propriety which prohibit her from being adaptable and flexible in the wild. She is a product of a value system evident through her insistence on keeping a stiff upper lip and a respectable appearance, taking care of her attire, washing and pressing it at every opportunity to the point where at the end of the film they look brand new. This leads to an unnatural sense of formality and modesty. After two arduous days, when the children stumble upon an oasis, the boy takes his clothes off and jumps into the pond. On the other hand, the girl with her internalised codes of propriety keeps her slip and bra on, contenting herself with a sponge bath, which is less refreshing and even absurd under the circumstances. Her reluctance to undress in front of her brother is a connotation of her sexual repression, which would later become manifest in the created barriers between herself and the Aboriginal boy.

The extent of this socialisation is apparent in her first meeting with the Aboriginal boy when they are on the precipice of dehydration and starvation. The image of the Aboriginal boy is seen on the horizon and realising that he might know about where

to get water, the boy and the girl run up to him and the girl asks him in English how to get water. He does not understand her. This failure to understand frustrates the girl who repeats “water” in louder and more demanding tones until she becomes hysterical and shouts, “Water, we need water. Surely you can understand that, anyone can understand that!” As the Aboriginal boy who still does not understand what they are talking about turns to leave, the little boy points to his mouth and makes drinking noises and the Aboriginal boy laughs and says “guapa, guapa” and shows them how to draw water from the ground. The girl should know how to communicate more effectively than her brother, but her insistence on the Aboriginal boy understanding her language and frames of reference connotes an imperialistic ingrained prejudice.

This attitude is represented as ingrained in the girl throughout the movie and is clearly evident in the scene when the Aboriginal boy brings the children to an abandoned house. The less indoctrinated boy is more open and willing of communication and in the following days imitates Aboriginal movement and dress, learns the language and adapts to the environment. He later becomes interpreter as well between the Aboriginal boy and his sister.

The next level of connotation of the denoted distance between the girl and the Aboriginal boy is a sexual tension between the two adolescents. Roeg makes her sexual fears explicit when the three play in the trees. As the Aboriginal boy swings through the branches and helps her up to a branch, she keeps her legs crossed so that her underwear cannot be seen. After they descend the tree, the girl looks at the tree trunks. Under her gaze the music becomes softer and shots of the branches of the trees become almost human and erotic. This when tied with her earlier, furtive glances at the Aboriginal boy’s waist has unmistakable sexual implications, as well as her refusal to finish her statement that her body “got a bit sore from...oh dear”, simply playing in the trees. Rather than directly face her sexuality, she hides from it, replacing the innocence of the tree game with mistaken reserve and guilt which is a direct result of her socialisation.

Instead of confronting the sexual problem, she avoids any prolonged direct contact with the Aboriginal boy. When she does interact she keeps her manner maternal,



warning her brother not to take his shirt off and later when he gets sunburned reprimanding him for not listening to her. She tells her brother not to bother telling the Aboriginal boy a story that he cannot possibly comprehend, yet interrupts and corrects him by pointing out details of the story the boy missed out and inconsistencies in his version. In addition to her irritability, her fears lead her to refuse becoming involved in the Aboriginal boy's culture. Her brother is painted with Aboriginal body paint and responds to the Aboriginal boy's art, while she complains that they do not even have real crayons and paint. This portrayal represents not only a repression of her sexuality but also positions her as a representative of the disconnection felt by most of white Australia towards the values of Aboriginal culture. An implication of the girl's disinterest is evident in the girl's refusal to be moved by the artwork or body paint or skills of survival that the Aboriginal boy displays.

A few scenes later when the Aboriginal boy begins his dance and gazes at the girl without her blouse on, she becomes terrified and slams the door and huddles in the corner. She almost screams when the door finally opens, and to her relief her brother walks in. As frightened as she is, she retains enough control and propriety to be able to protect her brother from what she herself fears. Her brother repeatedly demands to know what the dance means and she replies by saying that "maybe it's his way of saying goodbye". She begins preparing for their return to 'civilisation'.

The dance of the Aboriginal boy is both aggressive and gentle. "For if some of the movements imply the warrior, his tender offering of flowers promises war against her only in her own defence" (Izod, 1992: 61). The girl retreats at once in terror and instead of understanding the dance, she mumbles her anxieties to her brother alleging that the Aboriginal boy might attempt some unspeakable act or might even try to kill them. These apprehensions are so removed from the dignified behaviour that the Aboriginal boy had shown that they are clearly her own projected images. They have the archetypal connotations of the shadow that overlays the 'black male' image, where onto this image are projected qualities that are not his own but are:

the secret desires and fears of whites. One of the dominant constellations around his image mythifies his sexuality. The black is

said to experience ungovernable desires, and to have the nature of a rapist (always a rapist of white women). (Izod, 1992: 62)

These racial typifications are then projected by the girl onto her brother through her ignorant terror of the Aboriginal boy, who has actually saved their life. This unfortunately only serves to reinforce the stereotyping of Aboriginal male identity.

The Aboriginal boy has served his purpose and is now disposable. He dances until exhausted and when the girl and boy awaken they find the Aboriginal boy hanging from the mango tree. On discovery of this death the girl bluntly asks her brother, while they stare at the corpse, "Did you eat your breakfast properly? You should always sit down when you eat and not wander about." She picks up some mangoes from the ground beneath his hanging body and puts them away in her brother's satchel. She stares briefly at the corpse and absentmindedly flicks off some ants that are crawling over his body. The gesture is both tender and practical. However she does not spend more time there and walks off towards the road with her brother.

She is eager to return to 'civilisation', "to have a warm bath with clean towels, to eat with real knives, plates and forks, to have proper sheets and records." She quickly realises though that so called 'civilised' society is indifferent to their ordeal when the lone inhabitant of an almost deserted town is concerned only that the children do not trespass on his property. The reality of 'civilisation' is almost as hard as the desert's, exemplified in the shot of the two children in a junkyard trying to flag down a ride. This can be contrasted with the caring attitude of the Aboriginal boy who immediately offered them help and support despite being from a so-called 'primitive' sensibility. The image is once again centred on the oppositional characterisation of Roeg's representatives of 'civilisation' who are uncaring and unflinching towards the children's needs, and the 'primitive' as typified in the assistance the Aboriginal boy provided.

Roeg swish pans and flashes forward to a scene in the city several years later where the girl is now married and preparing dinner in the same apartment that her mother had occupied in the beginning of the film. The couple is still young, so perhaps her husband does not ignore her and instead tells her about a promotion at work, but she ignores him. As he continues, the girl remembers her 'walkabout'. She visualises

her brother and herself naked on a mud bank in the middle of a pond and the young Aboriginal boy smiles, dives into the water and swims towards them. As the three laugh and play, over the soundtrack the audience hears A. E Housman's lament from 'A Shropshire Lad' for a lost state of grace:

Into my heart an air that kills, from yon far country blows. What are those blue remembered hills, what spires, what farms are those? That is the land of lost content; I see it shining, playing the happy highways where I went and cannot come again. (Housman, 1948: 58)

The girl has perhaps missed her chance for a simpler life.

This is connoted not only through the poem but also Roeg's framing technique of this last scene as identical to the very first visual frame. Before the first visual in the film, a voice whispers in French, "Faites vous jeux" - the croupiers announcement that bets may be placed on the game. At the very end of the movie, after the poem, after the credits, and after that final visual, the whisper returns, "Rien ne va plus" - the last chance to place bets has passed. At first this seems a peculiarity, but it forms a life analogy for the decisions the girl takes. Through her passivity, she has chosen the same life as her parents, living in the same apartment block as them, perhaps in a continuation of this life analogy, waiting to share her mother's fate. The girl refused a more natural elemental lifestyle for the city. All she is shown to be left with is her romanticised memory of the "happy highway" on which she "cannot come" again. "The sadness is less for the loss of a perfect past than for the loss of a possible future" (Izod, 1980: 116).

The girl however cannot be blamed for returning from the desert, as the notion of remaining in the bush seems an unrealistic alternative. She is a product of modern society and as such, the film tells the viewers, it is not a "question of free will" but of "that that is, is." It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is a pessimistic ending. Roeg however discounts such an interpretation and states instead that "at the end there was hope, even if it was a subjective thing for the girl. It had touched the girl" (Hay and Davis, 1974: 3).

Nonetheless, the optimism that Roeg projects for the girl's transformation with her experiences in the desert is tempered with what is connoted on screen. Her

transformation, far from being optimistic, is a troubling one, that of going back to civilisation and its trappings. The girl ventured out into the desert but she carried the values of her 'civilisation' with her and eventually returned to them. At the end imprisoned by these values she:

will still be 'looking at the waste' [desert], implicitly unsatisfied by her life, tormented and even traumatised by her sense of the potential and possibilities of an alternative life, but choosing instead to come to terms (as we all must) with the protection yet discontents of civilisation. (Sinyard, 1991: 31)

It is however these protections of civilisation that ultimately mark her fate, because she is not Aboriginal and she cannot be expected to engage in that role in her life. She does not belong to the desert, or its 'way of life' and hence cannot be expected to return to it.

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 binary oppositions present within it are revealed through the city's contrast with the inquisitive and instinctive world of childhood and with the stark desert landscape bristling with danger and vitality and icons of Aboriginal culture.

Additionally it also presents a cinematic anomaly, that of a major Aboriginal character within the film text. As such, it:

made up for so much bypassing (except for *Jedda* and *Journey Out Of Darkness*) of Aboriginal themes in feature films. It highlighted how cinema could approach realistically, poetically, symbolically, such Aboriginal themes. (Malone, 1988: 34)

While this may be true, unfortunately, 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". 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. Despite his likeability, his character representation on screen "does not generate enough of an emotional attraction to engage us on a primal level; his final response becomes irrelevant to the film as it is now structured and is thus not missed" (Feineman, 1978: 74). 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 also 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 this ultimate death. Hence the Aboriginal boy is no more than the mental image of a connoted 'noble savage' who is doomed to destruction. *Walkabout* did not deviate from the stereotypical portrait of the Aboriginal 'bush boy' embellished with supposed anthropological 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.

Roeg defends himself against the criticism that he was equating the Aboriginal boy with the 'noble savage' and says that he was instead "exploring the different values of the white children and the black boy, and exploring the implications of a simpler form of life" (Sinyard, 1991: 39). The "implications of a simpler form of life" makes the film represent the life of 'civilization' as arid and unrewarding, allowing viewers to believe that the 'simpler' life of the Aboriginal boy is happier, and that his life is more rewarding. Such easy idealism ascribes to the 'noble savage' line of thought.

The enduring theme of the tortured 'savage' torn between two cultures persists in the filmic representation of the Aboriginal boy. Frances Peters-Little points out that in classic dramatic formats, it is the 'noble savage' who is an anti-hero but befriends white men who ultimately betray or try to 'save' or convert him. The 'savage' is usually driven to extreme measures which end in his/her demise. Aboriginal characters in feature films like Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955), Fred Schepesi's *Chant Of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), and Bruce Beresford's *Fringe Dwellers* (1986) all highlight the notion of Aboriginal characters being torn between two cultures. *Walkabout* highlights this theme as well:

The notion of Aborigines being 'torn' between cultures acts as the explanation for the demise of Aboriginal characters, rather than a situation where whites themselves take an active role in the Aborigines 'inevitable doom'. Rather than accept responsibility, it is easier to blame blacks for being lost between two worlds. (Little, 2003: 31)

It is the 'savage' Aboriginal boy who befriends two white children and ultimately takes his own life because he is 'torn' between the two cultures.

As Roeg himself sums up in the commentary of the 1998 DVD re-release of the film, “The boy is rejected and the boy dies”. Roeg thus implies his film was only the exploration of a ‘simpler’ form of Aboriginal life rather than an acceptance of a ‘noble savage’ image, an image in which two cultures are connoted to be at odds with each other. As the Aboriginal boy becomes guide for the lost white children, the audience is also taken on a journey of discovery of the Outback and is presented with a strong sense of how the Aboriginal boy perceives and understands his world. Audiences gain some appreciation of the spiritual values inevitably involved.

The white girl resists all but the practicalities he teaches and eventually re-asserts her European values with a tragically demoralizing effect on the Aboriginal boy. Although a stifling and destructive alienation is manifested in her world, the contrasted sensitivity and spirituality of the Aboriginal boy's relationship to his environment is shown to be too fragile to survive confrontation with the rationalist, sceptical Western attitude she expresses. He is the doomed ‘noble savage’ who is rejected and he commits suicide - a sad and ironic allegory of the way the whole Aboriginal race became the victims of arrogant, cruel Europeans with their assumption of a natural cultural and moral superiority.

Roeg's movie hence remains a statement on the cost of two cultures misunderstanding each other, as well as being one of the few films to understand the Australian landscape as a character in its own right. The refusal of white culture to accommodate or even acknowledge Aboriginal culture in the movie forms a significant point of referral to the majority of Australian identity. A significant portion of the film text directly relates to the repression and oppression felt by the girl and her father. 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 & Mayer, 1992: 182)

Nonetheless it has gained a new generation of admirers with its re-release in 1998. It is ironic that it “took a stranger in a strange land to reveal this to us” (Nowra, 2003: 76).



## Chapter 14: Transformations – *Rabbit Proof Fence*

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* bears witness to what it calls in its introduction a “true story”– a “story of my sister Daisy and my cousin Gracie and me when we were little.” The film presents a storytelling mode similar to that mobilised by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s (HREOC) Inquiry and Report, *Bringing Them Home*. Between the publishing of the book Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence (1996) and the production of the film (2001), the context for narratives concerning the Stolen Generations was altered by the publishing of *Bringing Them Home* (1997). In both *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Bringing Them Home*, personal testimony was mobilised for political affect, placing the audience in ethical relation to the teller - as witness “in the second person” (Felman & Laub, 1992: 58) to historical experience.

In an account of a real life incident based on public records and the memoirs of Doris Pilkington-Garimara, the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* presented the story of a heroic journey home. Three Mardudjara girls made this extraordinary journey in 1931, from their captivity at Moore River Settlement to their home in Jigalong, nearly 1600 miles away. They were taken away from their home based on the policy of removing so-called “half caste” children. This story may seem exceptional but was in fact typical. In a historical context, such abductions of children were usual and unfortunately widespread. The practice of forcible removal was at its peak from 1910 to 1970, where it is estimated that between 10 and 30 percent of Indigenous children, mostly girls, were removed from their families and communities (Healey, 1998: 8).

Aboriginal children were removed from their families from as early on as 1820. From 1860, as part of the ‘protection’ policies, the Governor could order the removal of any child to a reformatory or industrial school. The Protection Board could remove children from station families to be housed in dormitories. From 1939 until 1971 the Director of Native Welfare was the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children, whether or not their parents were living.

The *Bringing Them Home* report documented a number of findings, including the controversial statement that the policies of forcible separation constituted genocide

within the terms of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The forcible removal was intended to ‘absorb’, ‘merge’, and ‘assimilate’ Aboriginal children. The legal definition of genocide, Article II, states genocide means “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part”, meaning intent with bad faith, although it does not explicitly rule out intent with good faith. The ultimate purpose of the deeds are however irrelevant. “The crime of genocide is committed whenever the intentional destruction of a protected group takes place” (Starkman, 1984: 1). Genocide hence does not require malice but can be misguidedly committed in the interests of a protected population (Storey, 1998: 227-230). Assimilation identified a ‘problem’ and justified removal as its ‘solution’, which the report argued constituted genocide. The first recommendation in *Bringing Them Home* was to fund agencies which would record the experiences of the estimated 100,000 Aboriginal children who were removed between the 1920s and 1960s. *Rabbit Proof Fence* formed a broader arena for such a record of experience.

*Bringing Them Home* had a profound impact on Australian national identity. In the days following the report’s tabling in parliament, politicians are said to have wept openly at its findings that as many as 30 per cent of all Aboriginal children born between 1900 and 1970 were forcibly removed or ‘stolen’ from their mothers and communities (Manne, 2002: 4). As an intense moment of national shame and collective remorse, it heralded a public outcry mediated by the national media. *Rabbit Proof Fence* emerged in this political climate, with its claims of being politically astute and a story that was ‘long overdue’. However, upon its release it was also criticised as being a misleading depiction of historical events and figures, that it supposedly damaged Australia’s ‘good name’. In a national conference on the subject titled ‘Truth and Sentimentality’, organised by the right-wing journal ‘Quadrant’ (Manne, 2002: 5) participants argued that the ‘new intelligentsia’, including the authors of *Bringing Them Home*, infected the public spheres of politics and the media with a dangerous sentimentality about the ‘so-called Aboriginal problem’ which, they also claimed, encouraged an anti-Australian ethos.

Through a dialogic engagement of telling and listening, this film provoked the audience to acknowledge the story and history of the Stolen Generations. It also

demanded audiences to take responsibility for positioning themselves in empathetic self-reflection. By conveying the enormity of the pain involved in the shameful and long buried episode in Australian history, the social and historical obligation of audiences to the Stolen Generations was exemplified through the narrative of *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

Pilkington-Garimara's narrative was adapted by Christine Olsen as her first screenplay. She then contacted Australian film-maker Phillip Noyce, critically acclaimed for Australian films such as *Back Roads* (1977), *Heat Wave* (1982), and *Dead Calm* (1989). It had been a long time since Noyce had made a film outside America, where he is best known for producing Hollywood 'action blockbusters' such as *Patriot Games* (1992), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *The Bone Collector* (1999), and *The Quiet American* (2002). Noyce acknowledges that the attraction to the script came from what he calls the film's 'universal elements' (Collins & Davis, 2004: 134), in his words, a desire to deviate from being "a migrant worker in this Hollywood system. It's time to make something for myself and something that I'm more connected to" (Cordaïy, 2003: 128-129).

*Rabbit Proof Fence* serves the important and cathartic purpose of empowerment for Aboriginal voices through storytelling, giving voice to perspectives that would otherwise have remained buried under the sweep of history. There was a sense of mission that Noyce felt needed to be addressed through the story, providing its cathartic release, "...with this film there is an added bonus in as much as, it's telling a very significant part of Australian history that by and large has been denied us" (Noyce, 2001: 10).

Noyce describes the effect of reading the screenplay as being:

...overwhelmed by the story. Emotionally overwhelmed. I really strongly identified with the three girls, Molly, Daisy and Gracie, and that was not because they were black. It was just because they were young children who were powerless and had no redress and seemingly no escape from their destiny. And who, after an almighty effort, triumph. I found myself on their side, in their shoes, massively identifying with them, very soon into the story. (Urban, 2002)

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?” Noyce also took several steps to ensure that the film was made in a culturally appropriate manner. Pilkington-Garimara was employed as an active consultant in the film-making process.

Some critical commentary (Akerman, 2002: 54) on the film *Rabbit Proof Fence* upon its release disputed the representation of the administrative practices of the time the film was set. It was argued that protectors, like A. O. Neville, did not ‘steal’ children from their families, rather ‘rescued’ them from hostile tribal Aboriginal people who did not recognise children of ‘mixed’ descent. Akerman’s commentary displays the cultural prejudice that emerged as a by-product of the *Bringing Them Home* report. Other reviewers however read the film as a universal story (Keller, 2002) framed within a compelling Stolen Generations narrative, but one that celebrated the girls’ pursuit of individual freedom and the belief that “personal courage and love of each other will see us through” (Thompson, 2002). Gesturing towards reconciliation in an invocation that included an “us”, Thompson continues “[w]e can make it home to where we belong” (Thompson, 2002).

Akerman’s commentary also dismissed the film’s contribution to national culture and history because it presented a “tinseltown version of an Australian story” (Akerman, 2002: 89). Akerman’s accusation lay in the suggestion that the film did not depict historical reality, rather its primary aim was to elicit emotion. In an interview following a screening of the film in Newcastle, Noyce’s response to the accusation was to claim his aim from the very start was to make a “mainstream film” (Noyce, 2002).

He admits that:

Hollywood knows how to reach audiences. I've learned the lessons in marketing and casting that Hollywood teaches. Now I have to use these skills to sell an indigenous (sic) story to the mainstream. It's not overtly political but covertly. Hollywood can do this and do this well. (Mills, 2002: 15)

*Rabbit Proof Fence*'s empathic 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 audience engagement based upon empathy undermines the recognition of the distinctive Indigenous experiences that the story simultaneously claims.

In the weeks leading to the release of the film nation wide, Noyce, Olsen, and others involved in the project made numerous appearances on current affairs and talk shows. Noyce also applied his skills in 'star making' to the main characters in the film. Dolly, a popular teenage magazine, for example, ran a four-page spread on Everlyn Sampi, who plays Molly. Such aggressive campaigning underlined Noyce's desire to break into the Hollywood market with a story that was uniquely Australian, and yet conformed to the 'mainstream'. Noyce did not want to make "an art-house film seen only by the converted" (Mills, 2002: 15), and defended the film's Hollywood elements and appeal to the senses.

Despite the emphasis on the 'local' Australian narrative of the film, Noyce approached the film as a universal story. 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. An example of this 'language of empathy' is in the removal scene of the children, where he dramatised the 'local' story to evoke empathy from the audience to the plight of the girls, and hence to the plight of the Stolen Generations universally. 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).

*Rabbit Proof Fence's* subplot concerning the tracker 'Mudoo' (played by David Gulpilil), signalled in the film by the intrusion of didgeridoo music, both looks back to *Jedda* (1955) and forward to Rolf De Heer's *The Tracker* (2002), whose hero is also played by Gulpilil. The film's subject, that of Indigenous identity and historical complexities of the Stolen Generations and its ensuing problems, is presented as soluble only by stepping outside the framework of the nation, further suggesting that part of the problem is the nation itself. The film inescapably revolves around the national debate about the Stolen Generations. It looks outward to the audience for ethical resolutions, presenting powerful images on screen prompted by the *Bringing Them Home* report, an inquiry that changed Australia's self-understanding. The issue of the Stolen Generations and the question of a national apology by the government "moved from the margin to the centre of Australian self understanding and contemporary political debate" (Manne, 2001: 110).

However *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, while in many ways being conditioned by *Bringing Them Home*, is antithetical to the report's form of expression. The report amassed 535 separate oral accounts of separation, outlining the differing situations and outcomes; while the film chooses one story to exemplify all stories of removal and abduction. For example, the viewer learns next to nothing about the other inmates at Moore River Settlement. To this extent the film exemplifies a tendency towards the formation of a 'Stolen Generations narrative' in which the specificities of experience are subtly drawn together into a single meta-experience (Attwood, 2002). The formation of a Stolen Generations narrative is assembled into a single experience.

In addition to the Hollywood style promotional campaign, the film itself bears testimony to Hollywood genres, in particular the action film. The narrative structure of *Rabbit Proof Fence* sets it through classic Hollywood Western genres, with the first half of the film involving the three girls being taken to Moore River Settlement and the second half showing their escape and chase to recapture them. The chase element in the film helps to set up the unspoken relationship between Mudoo and Molly. Mudoo develops a deep admiration for Molly's cleverness at escaping and her determined efforts to 'go home'.

The Political History genre is also closely tied up in the film in a rough hybrid form, where melodrama is added to the historical facts. Olsen admits that she had conceived of the film as a 'war story'. In the foreword to the screenplay she writes:

This is a war story. The country has been invaded and taken over. Now, even deep in the hinterland, the invaders are reaching out and taking away the children. They are placed in camps from which only three escape. To get back home they must cross through enemy-occupied territory never knowing who their friends are, who is out to get them. (Olsen, 2002: vii-viii)

The 'war story' theme is registered in scenes where the girls briefly wear military great coats. The sense is also one of not only watching a war story, but one of watching a Holocaust film. Barbed wire is incorporated into the lettering of the title of the film. Close ups of the fence occur throughout the film. The fence itself forms an icon along with the wedge-tail eagle which is Molly's totem in the film.

Where *Bringing Them Home* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* reunite is in their gravitational dependence on the Nazi Holocaust as a foundational traumatic event. The report's finding of genocide is specifically grounded in the immediate post-war international legal response to the Nazi Holocaust. (D'aeth, 2002)

Images reminiscent of the Holocaust are hence used by Noyce to emphasize the survival stories that take place against a backdrop of non-survival, or escape stories that confound a more general condition of imprisonment.

The narrative of the film text begins with the shots of the wedge-tail eagle, as Molly (Everlyn Sampi) is told by her mother Maude (Ningali Lawford) that the 'spirit bird' will look after her. The introduction to their way of life is peaceful, highlighting a connection to the land seen through the shots of the mother and grandmother teaching the three children how to hunt for food. This denotation of Indigenous life is one of tranquil harmony with nature, which is sharply contrasted with the very next shot of the policemen on horseback, looking on, almost menacingly. The viewer is shown at this early point to mistrust and be wary of the mounted policemen, especially when the mother asks Molly to "hide those kids". The contrasting montage of tranquillity versus suspicion leaves the viewer with an inkling

of the coming removal of the children from their mother, but without any overt explanations.

The first significant point of detailed analysis concerns the connotations of assimilation in the filmic narrative. In a later scene in the film at Moore River Settlement, the camera moves along the nameless and faceless bodies of the children as they sleep in their quarters. As Molly, Gracie (Laura Monaghan), and Daisy (Tianna Sansbury) are led towards their bed, the scene is evocative of a concentration camp. The film makes cumulatively significant incorporations of Holocaust images, including the shaving of Olive's hair and the 'selection' scene where Neville selects the fairer children to be taken to Sister Kate's.

The movie portrays the first 'authority figure' for the children as being one of their own, the older girl who wakes them up in the morning and urges them to "hurry up". This presents the dilemma that Aboriginal people who worked in such missions and Settlements were placed in. They were the 'authority' figures, who upheld 'white law' and in essence aided assimilation. The theme of assimilated Aboriginal 'authority' figures is carried forward in the film through the set of scenes where the girls are confused at their new surroundings and the prayer at breakfast. They receive chastisement from the Aboriginal guard at the settlement who dismissively tells them that they "must talk English". Assimilation, and its implied connotations on screen, it seems is complete.

In the film's ironic portrayal of insidious assimilation it is an Aboriginal man who leads to the re-capture of Gracie. He informs Gracie that her mother is waiting for her at Woolloona and that all she has to do is catch a train there. While she waits at the train station, and as Molly and Daisy watch helplessly, she is recaptured. Noyce's dramatisation, in the scene where the girls are taken by Riggs at Jigalong, succeeds in influencing the raw emotions of the audience who are left with a sense of helplessness of the situation.

In its simplest terms, the film is a critique of assimilation, with Neville's portrayal (Kenneth Branagh) providing the vehicle of the film's critical assessment. The political debate over the film tended to either support the film's critique of



assimilation or refute it, within the broader debate surrounding the Stolen Generations. 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 film itself answers Neville and by extension the discourse of assimilation, through another representational regime, that of the practices of contemporary Hollywood cinema.

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 through 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. D'aeth comments on this in detail:

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: 6)

Through this 'empathetic imperative' the audience is being 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. The children are the 'them' in *Bringing Them Home*. 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 emphatic 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" (Corday, 2002: 129). However in claiming political and historical truth, this scene represents a specific traumatic event as a 'typical' representation.

The problem of referentiality extends to the process of identification. *Rabbit Proof Fence* as a representation of a specific traumatic event asks the audience to identify with the girls' story while moving beyond competing interpretations of events and claims to truth. One critic goes so far as to claim that it misleads viewers about the historical truth of the story (Akerman, 2002: 89). Others take a different approach and question the process of identification itself rather than representation and historical accuracy, asserting that the abduction scene is not effective because it occurs prematurely in the film (Mills, 2002: 15) and the full effect of the event has a smaller impact because it comes too early in terms of narrative structure in the story.

Molly's mother, Maude, collects her ration of flour, jokes with the European government officer, while the girls chat with the man employed by the government to maintain the fence. The mood of the scene is light but suddenly changes when the car approaches and Maude realises who the driver is and screams at the girls to run. It is precisely this scene's invasive quality in a tranquil scene and 'premature

occurrence' in the film that allows the audience to mark something other than character identification. It marks a different visual and aural register. The hand held camera work, which on the one hand evokes empathy from the viewer, also creates a skewed perspective on the events. The low angled pan shots are juxtaposed with a series of quick edits which show extreme close ups of Daisy and Gracie's stunned faces as they watch through the car windows the action taking place around them, and emphasising it as action that takes place around the audience as well. The film then cuts back to wide angle shots with the car receding into the distance as the mother and grandmother wail. This allows for two kinds of spectatorship. The intrusion of the non-realist camera techniques draws audiences into the action of the violence of the separation, while quickly repositioning the viewer at a distance in the following scene where the mother and grandmother sit wailing. It is true that "in the logic of identification, it may have worked better for us to have stayed with the girls...by repositioning us back with the mothers, to one side, the film insists that we witness the aftermath...in its intrusiveness, the scene takes us out of the historical time of the film's narrative, transporting us into the now" (Collins & Davis, 2004: 148).

Hence as a response to *Bringing Them Home*, the film recognises the necessity of viewers to witness not only historical truth but place it simultaneously in its present context. The film ultimately publicises symbols and images of the Stolen generations, making it another forum for the 'public hearing' of the trauma involved in child separations. The abduction scene supports this re-enactment for a public forum today.

The next level of analysis considers the interesting mix of the Political History genre and melodrama with historical facts as juxtaposed in the film with its central authoritative character in the form of A. O. Neville. As an architect of the Removal Policy in Western Australia, and Chief Protector from 1915 to 1940, Neville was one of the most influential figures in national history and an enthusiastic proponent of the eugenicist strategy of 'breeding out the colour'. The film depicts his vision of a society without 'half castes'. Mirroring contemporary views of the racial 'superiority' of the whites, Neville believed that it was better for the 'half castes' to be made more 'white' than 'black'. These contemporary views are evident when in

1936 the Western Australian parliament passed legislation that gave Neville the power to implement his 'breeding out' policy. The new law made European and Aboriginal sexual relations a legal offence, punishable by imprisonment.

Realistic historical details are used in the film to dramatise various aspects of Neville's philosophy. The transfer scenes cut back and forth from the girls' journey home to scenes of the inside of Neville's office. These scenes of Neville's office always purport an almost clinical mise en scene, one of a dank office. Throughout the film, Neville as an influential figure in national debates and policies about assimilation is dramatised through scenes of Neville 'at work'. Aspects of Neville's thinking are shown through his delivery of a lecture on his policies of child removal to a group of ladies. The scene makes no contribution to the drama of the plot but is used by Noyce to distract from the drama of the journey, fulfilling instead the film's aim of politically communicating the findings of the *Bringing Them Home* report and the racist and genocidal thinking that underpinned the policies of assimilation and child removal.

In the first of such scenes of Neville at work, he writes on Molly's card - "dark brown, not full blood". With this he authorises the removal of the children from Jigalong. Neville hands his file to his secretary and the deed is done. The consequences of this simple gesture are separated from the reality of removal, and the emotional depiction of it. The denotation is one of simplicity. This heightens the film text's sensibilities towards the historical plight of the 'protectionists', where Neville is seen as being a representation for the 'protectors' of that time who thought that what they were doing was right. In response to an attack by the Moseley Royal Commission in 1934, on the Government and on Neville in particular over the removal of children, he argued that:

There are scores of children in the bush camps who should be taken away from whoever is looking after them and placed in a settlement...If we are going to fit and train such children for the future they cannot be left as they are...I want to give these children a chance. (Jacobs, 1990: 235)

Neville asserted the Department's case for removing children from their mothers in the belief that the children's plight was a human tragedy that concerned him more deeply than any other aspect of his work. He believed that the children must be taken away to remove them from conditions which negated their chances in the 'outside world'. There was also little or no chance of protest, represented in the film through Briggs's (Jason Clarke) statement to the girls' grandmother, "There is nothing you can do old girl", as he takes them away. The referential meaning of this statement in the scene is one of the futility of the situation, and in particular connotes the futility of the 'Aboriginal situation', which was inevitably 'doomed'.

The pre-empted notion of the Aboriginal race being 'doomed' is concretised in the film through Neville's explanation to an audience of middle-class white ladies of his plans of preventing the "creation of an unwanted third race". In 1882 only 27% of the known Aboriginal population had been of apparent mixed descent, and by 1900 this proportion had arisen to 55% (Smith, 1975: 140). The 'Aborigines Protection Board' perceived its charges as posing a very real cultural as well as biological threat to the emerging nation of Australia and considered them:

...an increasing danger, because although there are only a few full-blooded Aborigines left, there are 6,000 of the mixed blood growing up. It is a danger to us to have a people like that among us, looking upon our institutions with eyes different from our own. (Scobie, 1915: 1967)

This recognition occurred as white male Australia became increasingly alarmed at the fall in birth-rates among white women, in particular middle class white women. The scene in the film thus evinces this concern.

The possibility of social disorder is addressed in biological terms to the group of middle class white women. The assumption is one of benefit. The immediate shift of scene to the girls being transported in a cage on a train bound for Moore River contradicts this 'benefit'. The language of the film assists viewers to directly relate to its signifiers and help make sense of a series of successive historical ideas, which contrast Neville's grand proposal that 'in spite of himself, the native must be saved'; to the actual way the 'natives' were being 'saved'.

Ultimately it was not so much a question of the ‘natives’ being ‘saved’ as a question of elimination, which Neville suggested when he wrote, “...eliminate the full-blood and permit the white admixture and eventually the race will become white” (West Australian, 18<sup>th</sup> June 1930). This was the essence of Neville’s subsequent arguments, that science, logic, and morality were on his side, and that there was no barrier to the eventual biological and social absorption of the ‘part-Aboriginal’ population into the European population of Australia. A belief that was echoed throughout Australia by the various State Protectors.

In the film, the montage immediately following the removal scene alternates shots of the train transporting the girls to Moore River with shots of the mothers’ grief. The image of the cage is continually typified, through the train scene and into the scene of the three girls being taken to Moore River on the back of the van. The shot places them within a ‘captive cage’ as they are bound within the planks of the truck. The connotation is one of being constrained, within the truck, within the shot, and hence within their situation, with little or no hope of escape.

At Moore River Native Settlement the girls are introduced to their ‘new’ way of life and the audience is shown the eventualities of historical situations. The nuns wash the girls on their first day there and while scrubbing proclaim that they “must wash you”. The dirt and its connotations of Aboriginality are being scrubbed away in favour of a cleaner and more ‘civilised’ way of life. The Settlement authorities, much like the Protectors, considered it their duty to rescue the ‘part-Aboriginal’ children and provide them with a home and an education which would bridge the gap between ‘uncivilised’ camp life and the ‘civilised’ white community.

In his reply to a letter from Phoebe Lefroy, who along with Sister Kate founded the Settlement, Neville states, “When at Moore River I saw a number of children whom I should like to transfer elsewhere, because they are so very white and should have the benefit of the doubt...” (Aborigines Department 279, 1932: 33). Echoing this notion in the film is the scene where Neville inspects the skins of the Settlement compound children, and the ‘civilised’ message in binary opposition to images of a ‘primitive’ Aboriginal is clearly articulated. Neville is shown to select lighter skinned children for transference to a “quarter-caste” institution. In this scene, Molly is informed by

the girl sitting next to her in line that they are, “checking for the fairer ones. They are more clever than us, they can go to proper school.” The implication of this for the children was that the lighter the skin, the more intelligent and favoured you were. “The lighter children were likely to be treated by state and church officials as if they were potentially different in character from their own brothers and sisters of darker colouring” (Read, 1999: 21).

In 1937 Neville led a Commonwealth conference on the issue of the removal of ‘half castes’ and the encouragement of marriages between ‘half castes’ and white men. He asked, “are we going to have a population of 1 million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any aborigines (sic) in Australia?” (*Bringing Them Home*, 1997: 30). This conference represented a personal triumph for Neville, for it adopted the Western Australian policy which stated that, “...the destiny of the natives of aboriginal (sic) origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end” (Aboriginal Welfare, 1937: 1). The film dramatises this aspect of Neville’s thinking through carefully placed representative markers of dialogue and policy throughout an otherwise conventional plot of the girl’s escape.

When the girls are believed by him to be moving into the desert country and he is sympathetic, almost paternalistic, in his worry that “their lives may be in danger”. However, in the same set of scenes and only moments prior to this he tells the officer that:

I do not expect you to understand what I am trying to do for these people. I will not have my plans put into jeopardy. People fail to understand that the problem of half castes is not simply going to go away - if it is not dealt with now, it will fester for years to come. These children are that problem. (*Rabbit Proof Fence*, 2004, transcribed from film)

The ‘fester for years to come’ was in contrast to Neville’s long-term plan of absorption which concluded that:

The problem of the native race, including half-castes, should be dealt with on a long-range plan. We should ask ourselves what will be the position say, 50 years hence; it is not so much the position today that has to be considered...by accepting the view that ultimately the native must be absorbed into the white population of Australia. (Aboriginal Welfare, 1937: 10)

Noyce treads on the issues of the past very carefully, perhaps to avoid any 'good' versus 'evil' dramatisation of Australian colonial history. It might be speculated that his intent was to not alienate an Australian audience who would be sensitive to such a skewed dramatisation. Neville is portrayed even-handedly, as a man who believed in the moral and civilising benefits of his mission and the superiority of the white race. In the scene when he realises that the girls are following the rabbit-proof fence he states, "Just because these people use Neolithic tools does not mean they have Neolithic minds." Representing Neville thus, rather than in embellished evil terms, evokes from the audience a sense of quiet dismal bleakness at the vast chasm between the two cultures.

The bleakness of the situation is connoted strongly at the end when Neville knows the girls have reached Jigalong. He dictates to his secretary a letter to be sent to Constable Riggs:

I would require to be kept informed of their whereabouts so at some future date they may indeed be recovered. We face an uphill battle with these people, especially the bush natives, who must be protected from themselves. If they would only understand what we are trying to do for them. (*Rabbit Proof Fence*, 2004, transcribed from film)

He is shown to be almost sad and sees it as his responsibility and right to 'civilise' them, a theme carried forward through history and through Neville's dramatisation in the film.

With the introduction of Mudoo (David Gulpilil) into the filmic narrative and analysed here as the next level of connotation, an ironic sense of the past and the assimilation of Aboriginal people into white culture is introduced. Born in 1953, in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, Gulpilil grew up in a tribal lifestyle north



east of Kakadu National park. In 1969 Nicholas Roeg chose him for the lead role in his film *Walkabout*, in which he played a lithe young dancer who rescues two British children in the outback. Since then, Gulpilil has lent his presence as a tracker in other major productions, the most celebrated being Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker* (2002). Gulpilil, as the tracker in *Rabbit Proof Fence*, enforces 'white law' and captures any children that escape the settlement. He is shown to exist in a double bind where his enforcement of 'white law' is in direct contrast to his own situation, his daughter being at Moore River. When he brings a run away girl back to the Settlement he is informed by the visiting Neville that his application to move away from the settlement is rejected, and even if it were not, there is "no question of her (his daughter) going." The part was added to strengthen audience emotional involvement with the character of the tracker who is forced to co-exist within the system. Previously the story never revealed the reasons for Mudoo being a tracker of his own people, which was another reality of the Stolen Generations (*Rabbit Proof Fence Study Kit*, 2001: 16).

In both *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *The Tracker* Gulpilil plays a similar role, that of the eponymous tracker, and "brings complexity and depth to both characters" (Stratton, 2002: 19). Both films deal with the ingrained racism of the times they are set in, 1931 and 1922 respectively. The mobilisation of colonial myths explains David Gulpilil's role as the tracker in *Rabbit Proof Fence* or even in *The Tracker* and *Walkabout*. Gulpilil reportedly told Rolf de Heer, "Rolf, matey. I'm really a Tracker" (*Inside Film*, 2002: 34). This provided the opportunity for the Tracker to be identified with Gulpilil's particular "authentic" self, making for representations and counter-representations of this self. This representation was reflected in the suggestion made by some of the film's reviewers that David Gulpilil's performance as a tracker was, in fact, not a performance at all, but an example of being "natural" (*Herald Sun*, August 15, 2002).

This romanticised description of Gulpilil as "natural" suggests that he is not granted the same anonymity as his fellow cast members. He is seen as being more 'real' due to the significance attached to his Aboriginality, overtly manifested in his tracking skills. This confines his contribution to the film as a mere presence in it (Probyn, 2005). Gulpilil as the tracker is accessible through the screen. With his use of

“traditional” skills and knowledge, the tracker informs audiences about Australian settler myths and what is seen to be ‘real’ Aboriginal, defined by its affinity with “nature”.

The ‘tracker’ also has the curious position of Aboriginal concurrence with white law. Later in the film when the three girls are on their journey across the barren landscape without any food, they are helped by a passing Aboriginal kangaroo hunter, who tells them that “the tracker from Moore River pretty good. Hear he catches run-aways. Gonna be good to beat him, gonna take you back to that place. You watch out for him eh?” The connotation is one of mistrust of the authority that Mudoo represents.

Historically, the lost child narrative dramatised the sense of loss, and impossibility of returning home, through its portrayal of involvement of a black tracker who was often summoned too late, as seen in *One Night The Moon* (2001). Aboriginal trackers constituted an irony where “often they [lost children] were saved by Aboriginal men who had been dispossessed of this same land” (Pierce, 1999: xii). The role of Aboriginal trackers in filmic narratives formed the analogy between the ill fated lost child of the bush and the fate of Aboriginal people, reinforcing notions of Aboriginal people as being a ‘dying race’.

This notion is countered by the representation of the tracker in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. As in *The Tracker*, Gulpilil’s dialogue is kept to a minimum, eliminating the usual audience expectations on the actual role of the tracker. Throughout the film Mudoo is shown to evince a glimmer of admiration at the ability of the three girls to escape so successfully. This redeems his essentially good nature, which is explicated by his sole dialogue in the film. He tells Riggs, “Pretty clever that girl. She wants to go home.” Mudoo recognises the need of Molly to go back to her home. Through such a portrayal of the tracker, and the success of Molly in escaping recapture, it reverses the tragic endings of the sense of loss and belatedness associated with lost child narratives.

The combination of Mudoo’s admiration and Molly’s escape strategies helps to create for viewers a greater form of identification with the characters. This generates a greater degree of anticipation. Gulpilil “added an unexpected regalness to the

character of Mudoo making the tracker who pursues the girls even more of a formidable adversary than originally conceived” (Rabbit Proof Fence Study Kit, 2001: 16).

A significant chapter in the history of the Stolen Generations also connoted briefly in the film is that of the exploitation of Aboriginal girls as domestic servants. The shortage of domestic servants had plagued the middle class in the early parts of the twentieth century. In 1915, when Neville was appointed Chief Protector of Aborigines, he was able to meet this increasing middle class demand by training young Aboriginal women as domestic servants, thereby creating a pool of readily available workers. This was where ‘special institutions’ like Moore River Native Settlement came in, providing “European managers and matrons with authority over government reserves” (Morris, 1985: 87). The Aboriginal girls received training in domestic work, sewing, knitting, and crocheting (Haebich, 1988: 191).

Once the girls were assessed by the white staff to be capable of performing household tasks they “graduated to become chattels of the Europeans” (Sabbioni, 1993: 16). Despite the domestic training enforced upon the girls in the Settlement, nothing prepared them for the harsh realities that awaited them on the farms. In a scene in the film the three girls reach the Evans farmstead where the Aboriginal domestic servant Mavis (Deborah Mailman) is hanging washing on the line. She tells them that “I was there (at Moore River) - too scared to run away - everyone was caught.” She is referring to the punishment that was meted out to runaways at the Settlement. Numerous accounts of young girls running away from the settlement report that their punishment was the ‘boob’, where “you used to do fourteen days and the trackers would bring you whatever there was to eat: water and things, you’d stay in there until your fourteen days was up. No windows. The door was padlocked outside” (Carter, 1981: 27).

Mavis immediately responds with sympathy and a desire to help the girls. She tells them that they can spend the night there with her. At night when the girls are asleep on Mavis’s bed, Mr. Evans (Don Barker) enters, removes his clothes, and pulls down the covers to reveal the scared faces of the three girls. He looks stunned and quickly puts his clothes back on and walks out of the room. He meets Mavis who tells him to

“go away”. Molly decides that the girls have to leave but changes her mind when Mavis pleads “Don’t go Molly. Please don’t go. He come back if you go. He wont say anything.” Mavis is terrified.

Historically, such situations were not uncommon. In accounts of the abuse by the European men of one household, one young woman recounts that she “was unable to lock the door to the hut and on her first night there a white workman attempted to break in to sexually assault her” (Haebich, 1988: 213). Neville despaired about the young women’s “downfall” which was often due to “their employers - married men with families - even their mentors” (Neville, 1947: 183). However, despite this criticism he failed in his duty as their legal guardian to prevent such conduct. In the 1929 annual report of the Settlement, 86 domestic workers had been sent out to service and in 1931, Neville in his annual report stated that “in the previous year thirty one women had been returned pregnant, the majority to white men” (Haebich, 1988: 313).

Noyce deals very subtly with this history of the sexual abuse of female domestic workers by their masters. He uses the character of Mavis to give the audience glimpses into the agony suffered by Aboriginal women and the impotence of their lives under the laws which were alleged to be for their ‘own good’. To understand the full extent of this pain presented in the film text lies beyond the present day experiences of audiences. This is perhaps why Noyce treads fleetingly on the shared history of sexual abuse of Aboriginal women in colonial history.

Instead, Noyce concentrates on the journey the three girls undertake, connoted to be a journey home for audiences themselves. On the precipice of starvation and dehydration in the desert, Molly and Daisy make the final leg of the journey back home to their mother and community. The suggestion in the film is that Molly’s strength to carry on is provided by her mother and grandmother through their ‘singing’. In the desert scene, where Molly lies physically exhausted, she is awakened and revived by the sound of the call of the eagle, the spirit bird which is her totem. She opens her eyes and is greeted by the sight of her country on the horizon as the glaze clears through the camera. She sighs to herself and says “home”, while she picks up Daisy and carries her.

The scene cuts to Neville's office where he instructs the officer to recapture the girls as soon as they reach Jigalong. Heading out to the bush in the dead of the night, Constable Riggs is spooked by the women's singing and the apparition of Maude and the grandmother in a tangle of trees. He quickly retreats, which leaves the women free to welcome the returning girls. The moment of reunification is tainted by Molly's sob that "I lost one", referring to the recapture of Gracie. Collins and Davis identify this reunification:

On one level, this image of reunification of three generations of Aboriginal women offers a satisfying resolution to the story, effectively assuaging social anxieties about past race relations, in particular the issue of the Stolen Generations. (Collins & Davis, 2004: 145)

However this is not where the film ends. It continues with a flash-forward to a documentary style filming of the real subjects of the film, as the real life Molly recounts the events following her return home.

On 13 January 2004, Molly Kelly died in her sleep at Jigalong. "The Age" newspaper's report on her death named her as "the heroine of the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*", validating the role of the film in bringing the hidden story of the epic journey she undertook to public attention. Without the presentation of such a story, she, and indeed the whole history of the Stolen Generations, might never have come to the attention of such a public arena. Molly's journey is described "as one of the most remarkable feats of endurance, cleverness and courage in Australian history" (Squires, 2004). The film did indeed fulfil Noyce's aim of 'recovering stolen histories'.

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: she was never reunited with the daughter taken from her 60 years ago" (Squires, 2004). In the space of a few seconds the real life Molly in the film explains how she was forced to repeat the trek from Moore River 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. (*Rabbit Proof Fence*, 2004, transcribed from film)

It is this aspect of her life her recapture, her second trek and the removal of her younger daughter who was never reunited with Molly, that perhaps enables audiences to comprehend the full traumatic magnitude of *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

On the visual level Molly's narration and almost documentary sequence highlight the real life subjects of the film. The real life Molly and Daisy are two 'found' members of the Stolen Generations. However, in light of the 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 ongoing-ness of their lives, and the presence of differing temporal, spatial, and cultural meanings, but these are shown to be separate from the 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. It's 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'.

Ultimately *Rabbit proof Fence* is a film that was prompted by the public outcry on the findings of *Bringing Them Home*. Its success might confirm that at some level of

Australian social imaginary audiences are perhaps more willing to acknowledge colonial history than in the time when *Jedda*, which received a lukewarm reception, was made. *Rabbit Proof Fence* succeeded where perhaps its predecessors, analysed in this thesis through *Jedda* and *Walkabout*, failed. Although these three films present similar public texts on assimilation and its consequences, only *Rabbit Proof Fence* provided audiences a better understanding of Aboriginal history and the Aboriginal situation.

The 'Aborigine' may still be seen as *the* 'lost child'. If this is so, then the image of Molly emerging from the desert, both as a child and later as a grown woman, is an iconic image of Aboriginal survival that shatters that particular myth by demanding recognition of Aboriginal people as being *at home* in their country. (Collins & Davis, 2004: 149)

The film recovers a trace of cinematic history for contemporary audiences, which is an inducement to all Australians to publicly remember the Stolen Generations and 'bring them home'. 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. Its 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.

*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. As a film of Aboriginal survival and resistance, *Rabbit Proof Fence* refutes visual representations and two centuries of historical representations of Aboriginal people as a 'doomed and dying race' who have no place in modernity.

## Chapter 15: A Comparative Analysis of the Film Texts

The film analyses of *Jedda*, *Walkabout*, *Night Cries*, and *Rabbit Proof Fence* provide insights concerning both the structure and function of the semiotic markers discussed in the Methodology. In this final section, the various themes employed in the individual analysis of film narratives are examined together as a structural whole in order to compare and contrast the ways in which the films display various semiotic markers. The recurrent themes that emerge and are discussed here pertain to the operation of narrative closure, myths, absent signifiers, and binary oppositions within the film texts. The themes that are gathered from such a comparative analysis are also contextualised within the historical era each filmic narrative operates.

Narrative closure is analysed as familiar patterns of expectations that end in a return to a predictable equilibrium. The referential correspondence between the four films, the time periods they were produced in, and their connotations of Indigenous identity all show a similar end or return to an accepted status quo. This reinforces the expectations of a predominant non-Indigenous identity, analysed here in respect to its bearing on Indigenous identity representation.

The four films represent various genres through the presentation of contrasting discourses portraying Aboriginal characters within the narrative. Their recurrent themes contribute to the development of an identity classification based on certain implied assumptions of Aboriginality. These assumptions can lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes intrinsic to the propagation of the ‘myth-making’ narratives of their time. Thus the four film texts are examined here using the insights from myth analysis. Such an analysis applies the structural principle of myth as being the opposition of binary terms such as nature/culture. It systematically transforms elements within the film narrative into other related oppositional pairs. This gives levels of symbolic meaning to the underlying layers of the filmic narrative.

This section also analyses implicit visual markers of binary oppositions existing as dualisms and the absent contextualisation of Aboriginal characters. Also explored is how these markers contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes and racial



hierarchies, placed within various time periods of film production. Treating the themes that emerge through this analysis as distinct and yet connected to the larger semiotic analysis attempted in this thesis provides an extension to the individual film analysis and connects with the methodological query.

### 1. Narrative closure and historical time periods

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 & Kress, 1988: 230). Where narratives end in a return to predictable equilibrium this is referred to as narrative closure. Structural closure is regarded as reinforcing the status quo.

The use of structural closure in the films which represent Indigenous characters analysed in this thesis follows the premise that the narratives end in a return to a predictable equilibrium. In Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda*, 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. 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.

Moffatt in *Night Cries* creates an extension of the storyline of *Jedda* by questioning narrative closures in its film text. Through her film, Moffatt works to dissect the narrative closures in *Jedda* and mediate it with Aboriginal images. The questioning in *Night Cries* about the mother/daughter relationship, and a contemporary reading of assimilation invert the pessimism involved in the earlier representations which *Jedda* connoted.

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 policy of Assimilation was promoted on the belief that:

The destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin but not of the full blood lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and... all effort should be directed to that end. Efforts by all state authorities should be directed towards the education of children of mixed blood at white standards, and their subsequent employment under the same conditions as whites with a view to taking their place in the white community." (Native Welfare Conference, 1937)

The underlying messages appeared to be that Aboriginal cultural beliefs and loyalties did not matter and that Aboriginal people were to accept the prevailing Euro-centric 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.

Similarly, in Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout*, 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, 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. The binary opposition between the images of the 'savage' untamed outback versus the 'civilisation' of the city also function as markers of the attitudes of the time.

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 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 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 Indigenous culture at the time.

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 underlying emphasis was a return to a predictable equilibrium of the destruction of the Aboriginal race, as with *Jedda*, or an exposition of the inherent weakness of the Aboriginal race, as represented in *Walkabout*.

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 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 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.

Even a more contemporary response to a changed socio-historical situation, such as that presented by Noyce in *Rabbit Proof Fence*, cannot ultimately discharge the formulaic narrative. The audience was made to comprehend the full meaning of the recapture of Molly and the removal of Molly's own daughter from her at the end of the film. The documentary like sequence at the end of the film focuses on the real life subjects of the Stolen Generations discourse and the effects of child separation. These documentary style 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 ending the filmic narrative detaches it from the rest of the film and makes it only indirectly accessible to audiences

Looked at through the realm of semiotic markers, the ending of the film characterises a return to the schema of 'familiar' events. The narrative structure of the film 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. A study of all such reductions to final and familiar temporal units in all films addressing Aboriginal representation is beyond the scope of this thesis, but in the films looked at here, the propensity of the narratives to exhibit such a narrative closure is evident.

## 2. Myths and Absent Signifiers

Semiotic theory insists on the arbitrary nature of the relationship between a sign and its referent, which may be structurally determined by given conventions. This understanding presumes that the referent precedes its sign, that a given reality exists prior to the code that describes and assigns meaning to it, even as that code or means of expression is the only way of rendering it objective and intelligible. But when a referent takes after its sign it becomes a sign of a sign which then becomes the empty signifier of another sign, and so on forming an abstracting, tautological reality (Barthes, 1970).

For Indigenous representation, this means that the image may commemorate the achieved reality, but it also remains the object of marked forms of Aboriginality. Aboriginality then is seen in relation to a natural, neutral, unmarked non-Aboriginality. Non-Aboriginality usually incurs an invisible status, and reflects the

naturalisation of dominant cultural values. It is essential at this juncture to include the comment that claims for marked and unmarked Aboriginality cannot be made absolutely because the films analysed in this thesis are particular in their representations of Aboriginal people, thus their Aboriginality tends to be marked in opposition to the white norm.

In *Walkabout* the Aboriginal boy's identity exists in a marked form through his affinity for nature and 'primitive' instincts, and digression from the modern, urban, 'civilised' world. In *Jedda*, Marbuk and Jedda also deviate from the conventional normative non-Aboriginality. Although Jedda has been reared to conform to the assimilated unmarked conventions of non-Aboriginality, it is her doom to be reduced to the expectations of her race. Jedda was susceptible to Marbuk's Indigenous 'influences' and despite being subject to an almost exclusively white upbringing, her 'primitive' self beckoned. Her non-Aboriginal upbringing is rendered an unmarked term, taken as given and the norm. Her 'natural' and 'primitive' Aboriginality is suppressed and excluded as an absent signifier, and allowed to make a statement on her race, only through its ultimate destruction. This makes the deviance of her marked form of Aboriginality clearly apparent.

Such a representation of marked Aboriginality is easy to identify largely because of the socio-historical conditions of the 1950s. Boundaries of such discourses have however been reclaimed by post Stolen Generations narratives and filmmakers such as Tracey Moffatt, whose work *Night Cries* enables an understanding of the representational complex unidentified by Chauvel and his contemporaries. *Night Cries*, as an extension of the story *Jedda*, addresses the absence of various scenarios by working in the enabling tradition of the experimental artist. This enabling tradition and Moffatt as a product of it, works through the system of intellectual novelty as opposed to the conditioned social myth-making system of the 1950s. It's Moffatt's imperative to signify that part of the film text that underscores *Jedda*, the relationship between the mother and daughter never extended by Chauvel, bears testament to the understanding that the referent need not necessarily take after its sign, but that an abstracting reality can be made concrete through the transformation of varying slates of myth over a period of diachronic change.

*Night Cries* is inscribed with memory more than dialogue. A changing dynamic between the mother as carer, to the daughter as the carer of an infirm mother, and the entrenched emotional dependency between them is more visible and intense after a viewing of *Jedda*. Moffatt questions the colonial discourses present within *Jedda* through a grounding in the history of Aboriginal subjugation, where the influences and consequences of the Assimilation policy are shown in everyday life. The result is a narrative which is from the daughter's point of view, unlike *Jedda* who was excluded from her own story, reinforcing her objectification. Moffatt does not work through a familiar narrative structure, rather the subjects within her film force the viewer to contemplate their situation. The change of such a narrative style, essence, and representation marks the change in the myth-making system over the lapse of time between the production of the two films.

Similarly, *Rabbit Proof Fence* follows the phenomena of mythical change over a period of time, where empty significations no longer take the place of visual representations of Aboriginal reality and identity. The representation of the three girls acts as a reflective statement on Aboriginal resistance and survival. It is historical story telling through a visual representation of colonial history. *Rabbit Proof Fence*'s narrative style retracts the primitivism at work in the making of *Jedda* and *Walkabout* and overturns over two centuries of colonial historical representations of Aboriginal people. It evidences the power of myths to perform the important function of 'change over time'.

The narratives of *Jedda* and *Walkabout* evince characters that meet destructive ends because of the inherent weakness of their race. The stories told within these filmic narratives are ultimately racist representations of Aboriginal characters, influenced by a pervasive social myth-making system and policy. *Rabbit Proof Fence* represents the same historical reality, but the narrative benefits from the 'change over time' in its production. It emerged from a political climate rendered communicable in a public forum of national shame and collective remorse over the Stolen Generations and a better understanding of the history of colonial abuse. Despite this it attempted to speak for all members of the Stolen Generations in presenting one story as tantamount to all 'stolen histories', tarnishing the merit of its filmic representation of Aboriginal identity.

In filmic representations of Indigenous identity, myths also underscore the conflation of the concept of identity and ideology, particularly in the sense of dominant discourses (Eagleton, 1991). The dominant discourse for Aboriginal representations centres around the prevalence of white colonial Australian discourses of identity and identification. Such colonial filmic discourses address the bush myth, family life, class structures, and race relations. These can be reduced to an ideology closely linked with the processes of colonisation and pioneering which have very little place for an accurate Indigenous identity representation operating within them.

The concept of national Australian identity itself, as a network of social mythology and widely held beliefs, marginalizes Aboriginal identity. Film as any other form of cultural production contributes to and is influenced by the content of such myths and ideologies. Films are influential in shaping popular images of an Australian 'national type', since they present supposedly unmediated and 'real' images of life. They thus acquire:

mythological resonance through their collaborative production process and their mode of communication as visual narrative...by embodying discourses which are relevant both within the filmic text and the social and cultural context. (Molloy, 1990: 202)

Within Australian social mythology, the dominant discourses that have played an active role in legitimating the status quo are, as stated earlier, those that are linked to the justification of colonisation and the establishment of a national identity that is far removed from Indigenous identity. Since myths help us to make sense of our experiences within a culture (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 185-6) and organize shared ways of conceptualising something within a culture, they also serve to conceptualise, support and legitimate the status quo.

As discussed in detail in the analysis of individual films, *Jedda* and *Walkabout* served to naturalise the prevalent assimilationist and racial rhetoric of the time in which they were produced. The accepted reality of the time preceded its means of expression in film, and yet the films themselves could not legitimate the status quo without operating within that particular time frame. "The attempt to produce a



‘popular’ product leads to the attempt to achieve a ‘fit’ between the closed text of the film and the open text of society...” (Malone, 1990: 202). The filmic texts contributed to the viewer’s knowledge of what ‘typical’ Australian identity was defined, and how Aboriginality was ‘aberrant’. Yet these discourses could not be depicted by the filmic text without the operation of the biased conceptual social pattern of the time.

Such a social pattern is expressed by the absence of any marked forms of non-Aboriginality in these films. The Indigenous characters within these films are ‘marked’ precisely because they are Aboriginal, as defined by the character representations of them. Non-Aboriginality is given an inherent natural implicit status. Despite the fact that Jedda and Marbuk in *Jedda*, and the Aboriginal boy in *Walkabout* are main characters in the respective films, their role in signification is given a secondary status. They are reduced to fulfil conventional assumptions of their time and conform to those normative expectations. The normative expectations being that as representatives of their race, they are doomed to destruction. Reduced to a pure signifying function, myth wants to see them only as a final term in a semiological chain of signifiers (Barthes, 1970: 114–15). The impact of such a signifying function reduces Aboriginality to the realm of an absent signifier, and reinforces the myth defining inferiority of their race, and consequently their identity representations.

As products of a different era and changed political discourse of the late 1980s and 1990s, *Night Cries* and *Rabbit Proof Fence* present Indigenous characters as more than reductions to archetypes. In the context of the socio-political changes within wider society and the myth-making system, changes occurred within the filmic representations of Aboriginal people as well. Textual analyses of the mythologies which inform Australian understandings of Aboriginal people reveal a change in the political and social climate. While all representations derive from historical representations of Aboriginality, the reaction against such representations has increased the chance of dialogue between what is felt as a non-Indigenous ‘normative’ with an Indigenous ‘deviant’. In the case of *Night Cries* this can be explained due to Moffatt’s effort to critically analyse Chauvel’s working on *Jedda*. Moffatt works within an anti-colonial discourse, re-writing the story *Jedda*

obliterated, reclaiming the mother/daughter and white/Aboriginal relationship with a contemporary subtext.

Noyce's motivations in *Rabbit Proof Fence* are harder to explain. Its success might confirm that at some level of Australian social imaginary today, audiences are willing to acknowledge the previous ambivalence of Aboriginal themes in films, such as those present in *Jedda* and *Walkabout*. This is brought to the big screen through *Rabbit Proof Fence* with a powerful contemporary sub-text. As a sum of significations of Indigenous identity, *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Night Cries* are harder to ignore within the greater Australian myth-making system in which they are produced, unlike their earlier produced counterparts.

Additionally film narrative is a myth-making system, but not in the strict Levi-Straussian sense of 'speaking itself' (Levi-Strauss, 1966). It is shared and propagated in a conscious way. Film is derived and dispersed through a conscious medium. However film does share an important attribute with myth and that is its public broadcast through society. Film narratives are acquired and disseminated in a conscious way to an audience in an attempt to provide narratives which are popular and commercially successful. These narratives are a response by the filmmaker's creative needs since they tend to favour narrative themes that have proved popular in the past, a tendency towards repetition that underlies the development of genres in various eras.

The cinema as a system of signification derives from the surrounding social system. Australia's quest for a 'national identity' has emerged from its colonial status and a degree of isolation, without having to contend with being surrounded by an overpowering neighbour, unlike other nations (Molloy, 1990: 9). Contradictions which have led to the establishment of myths in Australia are those that are contained in the realms of cultural institutions that derive from European, predominantly British, models.

The films chosen for this thesis are a product of the social myth ingrained in Australian audiences about Indigenous identity. They show that viewers extrapolate from filmic text to actual context, particularly with regards to a 'national identity'

that refuses to encompass Aboriginal identity. Attitudes and values are communicated and influenced by the propagation of an ideology of privilege through the analogical application of codes depicted within the film texts studied here. The silent movie era in Australian cinema right up to the 1960s in general celebrated a conquering settler identity and that of establishing an urban environment. Yet this celebration of nationhood occurred at the height of the Assimilationist policy. It is now possible to look at the films from the 1930s to the 1960s and see not just the absence of major Aboriginal subjects and themes and their conflicts with the settlers, but that this absence coincided with a period of genocide in Australia. The policies of forcible separation constituted genocide, where removal was intended to 'absorb' and 'merge' Aboriginal children with the intent of the destruction of the entire population. The implication of the cinematic absence was that to be Aboriginal was to be a non-entity.

Australian cinema in the 1970s was also notable for the lack of Aboriginal subjects. When Aboriginal characters did appear in films they were peripheral to the debate over 'national identity'. When Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) described colonial oppression from an Aboriginal perspective, local audiences shunned it. The box office failure provoked Schepisi to claim that this was due to inherent racism amongst Australian audiences (McCarthy, 2003: 5). The settler myth had appropriated Aboriginal authenticity and turned into a parody the quest for a value-free communication of identity.

### 3. Binary Oppositions

A consistent reinforcement of the racial stereotype is 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. Similarly for an analysis of filmic text, concrete details from the narrative are 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. This thesis follows the dualistic method of analysis, in that it analyses Australian filmic narratives as founded upon

underlying paired opposites or dyads. Contrasts between various representations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity are the skeletal structures on which the narratives are fleshed out.

The most glaring operation of this filmic dyad is seen in *Jedda* where Chauvel separates the interior shots from the exterior landscape shots 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. This underlying binarism extends to various instances in the film, which as outlined in the earlier analysis of *Jedda*, are scattered throughout the filmic narrative.

The distinctive imagery of the 'primitive' is 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* (Perkins, 2001) and *Beneath Clouds* (Sen, 2002) 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 imbued 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'. 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 & 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'. In avoiding the primitivism existent in *Walkabout*, *Rabbit Proof Fence* counters 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'. This constructs another underlying system of classification in filmic narratives studied in this thesis. 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 so called 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 to be 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.

## CONCLUSION

*Don't make films about Aborigines. Make Aboriginal films which are not films in the usual sense. Make films which are not Aboriginal in the usual sense.*

(Muecke, 1994: 256)

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. By examining the four films chosen for this thesis, the articulation, interrogation, and contestation of views about filmic representations of Indigenous identity in Australia over a fifty-year period is illuminated. Equally, the semiotic connotations, expressions of stereotypes, and operation of dualisms within the film texts are brought into the analysis.

The question that initiated such research asked: Why choose a study of cinematic representations at all? The answer elucidated in this thesis relates to the simplicity, popularity, and influence of the medium. Representation is made 'real' to an audience through the medium of film. It 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'.

Keeping this in mind, what is examined in this thesis is what Australian films are letting audiences 'know' about Indigenous identity. Through an analysis of four film texts, the messages that are being made 'known' to Australian audiences about Indigenous identity are examined. Most filmic representations unfortunately create Aboriginal characters who are 'figures of the imagination' and perceived as being safe distortions of actual reality (Langton, 1993). What Langton refers to is how Aboriginal people are regarded as being safe characters related through stories told by 'former colonists'. These representations are hence not of an actual world of people but only images that non-Aboriginal Australians find safe and acceptable. Such a focus on 'created' Indigenous identity representations centred on the next question: Can a study of cinematic representations really lead to a better understanding of Aboriginality and Indigenous identity in the wider socio-political and cultural context?



Firstly, any attempt to answer such a question involved recognition of the shifting definitions of Aboriginality and identity. Cultural representations of Aboriginality are engaged with problems of interpretation (Langton, 1993). Films cannot be separated from the representations they make, so the discussion of the question of authenticity in interpretation and representation has added a further dimension to the analysis undertaken in this thesis. 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 & Mishra, 1991). Thus the identity representation through such complexities of social regimes and the creation of racial discourses involved an investigation of constructions of race and Aboriginality.

Secondly, the operation of 'Aboriginalism' as a construct parallel to Orientalism was found to influence the definitions placed on Aboriginal identity. Aboriginalism allowed for an intellectual, cultural, and material construction of white colonial hegemony on Indigenous culture and identity. It allowed and continues to allow Aboriginal people to be structurally marginalized from Australian histories. This presented the strongest argument for Aboriginal exclusion from Australian narratives. Aboriginal exclusion further extended a colonial 'gaze' on Aboriginal issues and ultimately Aboriginal representation in cultural productions, such as film, where Aboriginal people have been shown as nothing else but victims, alcoholics, fringe, and slum dwellers (Kearney, 1993). This identity construction centred on a colonial gaze and operation of Aboriginalism can be seen to continue today in the medium of film, through the marginalisation of contemporary Aboriginal issues.

Thirdly, the shifting definitions and perceptions of Aboriginality were examined. Aboriginality is defined as a social concept that arises from subjective experiences and 'intercultural dialogue'. According to Marcia Langton, Aboriginality as a concept only arose out of contact with white culture, and even the definitions and enactments of Aboriginality between Aboriginal people exist today in the shadow of two hundred years of administrative attempts to define and control it (Langton, 1993). There is hope that today the inadequate definitions of Aboriginality, which equated it with a so-called 'primitive' and exotic world of the 'Other', will be

disregarded in favour of a holistic, contemporary identity definition. Only once such a holistic definition is attained can the colonial assumptions of Aboriginality and identity be finally disregarded. This also puts the whole concept of identity into question.

Questions on identity are not easy to resolve because identity itself is in a continual process of formulation and reformulation. Identities are formed through 'identifications' (Balibar, 1995) with a colossal 'we' and affirmed as a processing of the imaginary in relation to the 'Other'. Identity is not a singular entity, rather it encapsulates history, language, culture, tradition, and multiple discourses. This lends itself to the multiplicity of variables that exist within the concept of identity. Such a multiplicity forms identities, which show us 'who we are', and 'how we have been represented', marking it as a term that bears close examination with representation. Identities constitute themselves within and not outside representation (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). A study of the cinematic representations of such a multiplicity of definitions of Aboriginal identity then led to the next question: How does the cinema define Aboriginality in relation to non-Aboriginality and does it present a constructed representational complex for Aboriginal Australians?

Film is defined in the methodological enquiry in this thesis as a place of and for signification. It uses specific materials of expression and communication which can be understood to carry meaning through images of the world (Nichols, 1985). Thus the medium of film is defined to act as a signifying system because it simplifies, organises, and structures experience.

Film suggests less of a gap between the signifier and signified, (Metz, 1982) which makes it seem to offer more 'realistic' representations. The 'reality' of film and its immediacy to an audience constructs varying levels of identity to viewers who take representations on screen to be 'natural' (Jennings, 1993). This leads to the problem of representational complexes of Aboriginal identity being constructed on their behalf by the cinema itself. The operation of such representational complexes has been analysed further in this thesis.

Thus, to comprehend the complexities involved in race, Aboriginality, and identity constructions, this thesis examines specific film texts and their inextricable link to signification and the construction of meaning of the imagery that race carries for an audience. The manifest message of the cinema and its links to identity representation is examined in the four films chosen for analysis. This is done through a study of the semiotic markers that operate within the filmic narratives. Indigenous identity is examined within this semiotic analysis because film has the potential to carry meaning (Andrew, 1976; Hall, 1982; Barry, 1995; Buckland, 2000).

This thesis has analysed the specific connotative markers created for Aboriginal characters within the filmic narrative. Connotations function at the 'second level of representation', or second 'layering of meaning' (Barthes, 1977), which attributes meaning to the images presented on screen. The first level of representation produces literal denotations or apparent meanings of a sign. It is on this level that connotations produce referential meanings to the signs they denote. Thus specific connotators can load a sign with multiple meanings leading to a chain of connotations.

Through the operation of these connotations about Indigenous identity, an evident stereotyping of certain aspects of Indigenous identity has been made evident. These stereotypes revolve around the themes of the 'dying' Aboriginal race and other negative notions propagated and carried forward through the Assimilation policy. These include the notion of the modern primitive, historical guilt, and Aboriginal people seen in one-dimensional terms through the marked affinity with nature attributed to them.

The connotations 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 have been shown to be linked with myth and ideology. Myths function as ideological connotative meanings which legitimate the status quo and serve the interests of those in power (Van Leeuwen, 2002). This 'mystification' of assumptions about

Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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 Indigenous and non-Indigenous 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 analysed in this thesis to the policies and dominant discourses of each era and the myth-making systems.

The next level of analysis viewed the contrasts between different representations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity. The semiotic marker of binary oppositions or dualism in film texts was used to analyse these distinct operations. The most evident dualisms were: 'primitive' Indigenous identity being equated with a more 'civilised' non-Indigenous identity representation, the 'noble savage' image of Indigenous identity constituting a part of the old 'bush' ideology in contrast to a 'city' and urbanised non-Indigenous identity, and the 'self' versus 'Other' and 'us' versus 'them' systems of classification.

These classifications have enabled the operation of structural closures in the film texts. Structural closures return film narratives to an end where there is a restoration of the status quo. Such a return to familiar schemas and reinforcement of existent parameters in society had reduced Aboriginal identity to a finite and discrete temporal unit within the narrative. This could easily be sidelined or discarded in favour of the re-establishment of familiar mythic film narratives that non-Indigenous Australians can identify with, or ones which contrast with a triumph of Indigenous characterisations.

The semiotic nature of the analysis applied in this thesis has also elucidated the correlation of the underlying level of the cinema system with the surface level of individual films, montages, and shots. This is presented diagrammatically to highlight how the cinema lends structure to and is generated by the elements of

individual films it encompasses. The model presented in the Methodology organises the techniques inherent in all filmic narratives, those of montage and individual shots, and presents how these combine together to form individual films and the cinema system itself.

The model also illustrates that it is impossible to separate the underlying principles of the cinema from the films it describes. The cinema system is larger than, but encapsulates within it, individual films. It is a system of signs organised on the basis of codes and sub-codes which reflect the values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the dominant Australian cultural system within which it operates. It organises individual films into a group of films. In doing so, it establishes an overlapping structure with individual films. Individual films themselves are composed of montages of individual shots.

When individual films consisting of single shots and montages form a structure, it is mitigated by the conventions of the cinema system in which it operates. These conventions or textual codes are referred to as genres. Hence the cinema system outlines themes which provide popular and well established genres. Over a period of time, the methods of production and conventions of a genre become naturalised and are taken as reflections of 'reality'. Reality can start to pre-exist its representation. This is restated in the thesis through the filmic textual analysis where the manifest generic conventions and codes the cinema system ascribes to Indigenous identity are investigated.

This underlying cinema system operates through the layer of myth-making systems in Australian society. The interpretation of the myths that occur in the four film texts required that the individual film is understood by considering its position in the whole cycle of Australian myth-making systems. This analysis of filmic texts in the context of the larger cinema structure was seen through an overall network of basic opposing dyadic pairs existent in the narrative. The relationship between the tangible elements of the film text and the intangible elements of a culture are further analysed through the analogous connection between the logical structures of film and their connections with identity representations.

With such a theoretical grounding, this thesis chose four films to be analysed to view the context of semiotic operations within their texts, namely *Jedda*, *Night Cries*, *Walkabout*, and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. These films span a period of fifty years, allowing for a detailed analysis of the changes that have occurred over that period of time regarding representations of Aboriginal identity on screen. Hence historical discourses prevalent at the time of their production were juxtaposed with the socio-political and cultural changes.

These films also span a wide range of genres and styles making it inadequate to merely discuss their narrative content. Instead, the analysis further examined the ways in which the narrative unfolds and how the characters are developed through it. This thesis was not merely a descriptive survey of the literature available on Aboriginal representations in Australian cinema, but also the ways in which representational frameworks are articulated through these film texts, by employing semiotic applications in the process of analysis.

In the earlier film narratives of *Jedda* and *Walkabout*, foundations of the Australian myth-making system were imagined and established, often with detrimental effects on Aboriginal representation, if one was attempted at all. Cultural fictions of colonial nation building and the reinforcement of stereotypes about a dying Aboriginal race, established uncomplicated views of Australian identity and supposed unity. Assumptions about the position of Aboriginal culture as a source of cultural homogeneity, 'primitiveness', and one-dimensional affinity with nature remained uncontested. These claims did not differ in many ways, as is illustrated with the narratives of *Jedda* and *Walkabout*, which were produced nearly twenty years apart.

In comparison, representations of Aboriginal identity in Australian cinema in the latter half of the twentieth century are more complex and encompassing of a realistic and holistic Aboriginal culture, as seen in *Night Cries*. The 'traditional' cinema narratives of a homogenous, doomed Aboriginal culture in opposition to a civilised white culture, as viewed in *Jedda* and *Walkabout*, have been eclipsed by an Australian cultural myth-making system concerned with a more contemporary reading and representation of synchronous multiple national identities. *Night Cries*

occupies a significant niche in this changed political climate, in large part due to the efforts of Indigenous filmmaker Tracey Moffatt. The manner in which she juxtaposes her personal identity into the film making technique is discussed through the analysis in this thesis, which comprehends that *Night Cries* as an anti-colonial discourse working to re-write the story of *Jedda*. The analysis also addresses the inherent connotations of represented Aboriginal identity and discusses how the enabling tradition of more contemporary poly-ethnic representative film making systems is continued through *Night Cries*.

Working within such an enabling tradition, is what Moffatt and other contemporary Indigenous filmmakers do. This addresses the situation discussed at the start of this thesis on the *changing ways* (Krausz, 2003) in which the academic world and the media touch upon Indigenous representation. The reiteration of such a questioning suggests a renewed optimism for the possibility of future representations of Indigenous identity.

Unlike its earlier produced counterparts, *Rabbit Proof Fence* is harder to ignore in the Australian myth-making system, despite its expansive view of history and subsuming of all Stolen Generations histories into one typified narrative. The level of representation in *Rabbit Proof Fence* is not overtly racist and derogatory. Empty significations, such as those evident in *Jedda*, no longer take the place of visual representations of Aboriginal reality and identity.

The representation of the three girls in *Rabbit Proof Fence* and their journey home acts as a deliberate statement of historical story telling through a visual representation of colonial history. *Rabbit Proof Fence*'s narrative style also manages to rescind the primitivism at work in the making of *Jedda* and even *Walkabout*, where the Aboriginal boy epitomised the image of the 'noble savage'. It inverts over two centuries of colonial historical representations of Aboriginal people and posits evidence of the power of the national myth-making system to evince a change over a given period of time.

However, the hope expressed in the Introduction to this thesis of things having 'already changed' cannot be reiterated. The analysis of the film texts undertaken in

this thesis reveals that semiotic markers within the film texts directly point to a lack of realistic and holistic Aboriginal identity representations. *Rabbit Proof Fence* is produced almost fifty years later than *Jedda* and when it is viewed in opposition to *Jedda*, it operates at a different level of representation. However this level of representation is not as far removed from that of *Jedda* in the sense that romantic representations of Aboriginal identity still exist within the narrative of *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

The film text of *Rabbit Proof Fence* reinforces romanticised clichés of Aboriginal identity and represents one story in a vast history of the Stolen Generations to speak for all. As analysed in this thesis, *Rabbit Proof Fence* still shows gaps in its filmic representation of Indigenous history and identity. The filmic narrative compartmentalises the intergenerational effects of the trauma of the separation of Aboriginal children from their families and homes. The documentary style shots of Molly and Daisy at the end of the film appear authentic, but they do not make the actual reality of their lives a focus of the film, distancing that identification for some readers.

Consequently such representations reinforce the statement that things are in a continual process of change, but have not yet reached a level representative of an actual contemporary Indigenous socio-cultural, political, and historical identity. While it is true that the racist representations of a homogenised, assimilated, and dying Indigenous culture no longer exist, there still operates within filmic texts, the semiotic markers of negative connotations. Namely, the dualisms of primitive/civilised, self/'Other', and nature/culture, as well as stereotyping of Indigenous 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. The operation of the above mentioned semiotic markers vastly magnifies their influence on identity representation.



The subtext of a semiotic analysis of films, as the one accomplished in this thesis, incorporates *de novo* the questioning introduced at the start of this thesis. Specifically, the enquiry of whether ‘signs of creativity and hope’ (Malone, 1987) are found in Australian cinematic representations of Indigenous identity. There is no doubt that these signs do exist, but their level of operation, analysed purely through a semiotic analysis in this thesis, highlights glaring gaps within filmic narratives.

This thesis with its specific focus on a comparative analysis of four films only touches the surface of the possible multiple layers of identity representations in other filmic narratives produced within the time frame investigated here. It is hoped that the questioning begun in this thesis will initiate further detailed semiotic studies on Indigenous representation. The scope and range of these studies can focus upon the operation of contemporary dualisms and engage in further dialogue with the questions facilitated through this thesis.

Similar questions to the ones raised in this thesis can be applied to other film texts beyond those analysed here. A further study of film texts produced and directed by Indigenous filmmakers themselves can extend research into the study of textual constructions of ‘Aboriginality’. This can lead to a better understanding of Langton’s categorisations of mediated experience, where Aboriginal people interact with other Aboriginal people and in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in cultural dialogue and find forms of mutual comprehension (Langton, 1993: 81).

The strength and conviction of Aboriginal people to have a voice in their own filmic representations cannot be left unexamined. To combine such contemporary representations with the ability of film to act as a language in the semiotic sense of the term would enrich academic understanding in an area which, unfortunately, lacks in-depth subject matter analysis.

The investigation undertaken in this thesis analyses films as fundamental texts in popular culture. Whenever an attempt is made to question the very essence of cultural productions, the task becomes not only one of analysis, but also one of socio-cultural interpretation. Such an interpretation, analysis, and study is

accomplished in this thesis through answering fundamental questions on identity and representation.

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. Aboriginal people, as part of this dynamism have not been given the chance to display such manifest changes within their own identity representations.

Film texts are artistic and commercial productions based on the representation of images of society and identity and aim at evoking provocative responses from audiences (Molloy, 1993). They often connote more than what the filmmakers intend. The existence of mythology, dominant ideology, narrative closures, and dualisms in these film texts offer formulae to the cinema system which are at once old and yet open to new interpretations. Such formulae lead to the tendency towards narrative repetitions where structures and patterns shape and are in turn influenced by expectations of audiences.

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, specifically viewed in this thesis as semiotic theory with the practise of incorporations of Indigenous identity representations.

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 is defined as what the viewer identifies as his world of reality and what he believes to be the truth. The notion of 'truth' itself, when placed within the context of analysis in this thesis, is defined as a representation of an objective truth in cultural discourse.

In conclusion, this thesis set out to examine the conceptual frameworks which account for the attitudes and values of mainstream Australian society toward Aboriginal Australia. Through this, Indigenous identity representations were extrapolated from film to reality. Truth and reality are fluid and in the process of continual renewal and change. Unfortunately the 'truth' can easily be distorted depending on its positioning in relation to the subject, especially in the case of representations of the world of Indigenous reality. The filmmaker can acquire creative authority to represent Aboriginal 'reality' and 'truth' as objective, when in actuality it always remains a fictionalisation (Langton 1993). In such a way, it is easy for the truth to be lost in narrative accounts of it.

This is the danger of film exhibition and any kind of filmic representation. Viewed minimally, cinema is akin to Freudian scopophilia, simply the pleasure derived through looking. This pleasure can become a destabilising process if it does not question the scope and imagination of the signifier behind the camera, and the reception of the film text by an audience. The end product of such a process would only prove to be disastrous because it would limit the nature and extent of the lived experiences of a whole section of the population. In this case one who continues to be marginalised, misrepresented, and quite simply misunderstood. Such significant paradigms in film production and reception need to be examined through studies on representations of Indigenous identity in Australian cinema.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1

### List of films with Aboriginal characters, referred to in this study

1. *In The Wake of the Bounty* Director and Screenplay: Charles Chauvel, 1933.
2. *Uncivilised* Director: Charles Chauvel, Screenplay: E.V Timms, 1936
3. *A Nation is Built* Director: Frank Hurley, 1937.
4. *Bitter Springs* Director: Ralph Smart, Producer: Michael Balcon, Screenplay: W. P Lipscomb, Monja Danischewsky, 1950.
5. *The Phantom Stockman* Director and Screenplay: Lee Robinson, 1953.
6. *Jedda* Director and Producer: Charles Chauvel, Screenplay: Charles Chauvel and Elsa Chauvel, 1955.
7. *Dust in The Sun* Director: Lee Robinson, Producer: Chips Rafferty, Screenplay: W. P Lipscomb, Lee Robinson, Joy Cavill, Based on the novel 'Justin Bayard' by Jon Cleary, 1958.
8. *Journey out of Darkness* Director: James Trainor, Producer: Frank Brittain, Screenplay: Howard Koch, James Trainor, 1967.
9. *The Games* Director: Michael Winner, Screenplay: Erich Segal, Based on the novel by Hugh Atkinson, 1969.
10. *Walkabout* Director: Nicholas Roeg, Producer: Si Litvinoff, Screenplay: Edward Bond, based on the novel by James Vance Marshall, 1971.
11. *Come Out Fighting* Director and Screenplay: Nigel Buesst, Based on the play by Harry Martin, 1973.
12. *Eliza Fraser* Director and Producer: Tim Burstall, Screenplay: David Williamson, 1976.
13. *Mad Dog Morgan* Director and Screenplay: Philip Mora, Producer: Jeremy Thomas, Based on the book 'Morgan' by Margaret Carnegie, 1976.
14. *Storm Boy* Director: Henri Safran, Producer: Matt Carroll, Screenplay: Sonia Borg, Based on the novel by Colin Theile, 1976.
15. *Backroads* Director and Producer: Philip Noyce, Screenplay: John Emery, Philip Noyce and cast, 1977.
16. *The Last Wave* Director: Peter Weir, Producer: Hal McElroy and Jim McElroy, Screenplay: Peter Weir, Tony Morphett, Petru Popescu, 1977.

17. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* Director, Producer and Screenplay: Fred Schepisi, Based on the novel by Thomas Keneally, 1978.
18. *Manganinnie* Director: John Honey, Producer: Gilda Baracchi, Screenplay: Ken Kelso, Based on the novel by Beth Roberts, 1980.
19. *Wrong Side of the Road* Director: Ned Lander, Producer and Screenplay: Ned Lander, Graeme Isaac, 1981.
20. *We of the Never Never* Director: Igor Auzins, Producer: Greg Tepper, Screenplay: Peter Schreck, 1982.
21. *Going Down* Director: Hayon Keenan, Screenplay: Melissa Woods, Julie Barry, Moira MacLaine-Cross, 1983.
22. *Where the Green Ants Dream* Director and Screenplay: Werner Herzog, 1984.
23. *The Naked Country* Director: Tim Burstall, Producer: Ross Dimsey, Screenplay: Ross Dimsey and Tim Burstall, 1984.
24. *Robbery Under Arms* Director: Donald Crombie, Ken Hannam, Producer: Jock Blair, Screenplay: Graeme Koetsveld, Tony Morphet, 1985.
25. *Backlash* Director, Producer and Screenplay: Bill Bennett, 1986.
26. *The Fringe Dwellers* Director: Bruce Beresford, Producer: Sue Milliken, Screenplay: Bruce Beresford, Rhosin Beresford, 1986.
27. *Short Changed* Screenplay: Bob Merritt, Producer: Ross Matthews, Screenplay: Robert J Merritt, Ken Quinnell, 1985.
28. *Night Cries: A Rural tragedy* Director and Screenplay: Tracey Moffatt, Producer: Penny McDonald, 1990.
29. *Jindalee Lady* Director: Brian Syron, Producer: Brian Kearney Screenplay: Brian Kearney, 1990.
30. *Until the End of the World* Director: Wim Wenders, Screenplay: Michael Almereyda, Peter Carey, Solveig Dommartin, Wim Wenders, 1991.
31. *Deadly* Director: Esben Storm, Producer: Richard Moir, Screenplay: Esben Storm, Richard Moir, Randal Allan, 1992.
32. *Bedevil* Director: Tracey Moffatt, Producer: Anthony Buckley, Screenplay: Tracey Moffatt, 1993.
33. *Blackfellas* Director: James Ricketson, Producer: David Rapsey, Screenplay: James Ricketson, Archie Weller, 1993.

34. *The Life of Harry Dave* Director: Aleksis Vellis, Screenplay: Gerald Thompson, 1994.
35. *Dead Heart* Director: Nick Parsons, Producer: Bryan Brown, Helen Watts, Screenplay: Nick Parsons, 1996.
36. *Radiance* Director: Rachel Perkins, Screenplay: Louis Nowra, 1998.
37. *One Night the Moon* Director: Rachel Perkins, Producers: Kevin Lucas, Aanya Whitehead and Paul Humfress, Screenplay: John Romeril and Rachel Perkins, 2001.
38. *The Tracker* Director: Rolf de Heer, Producers: Bridget Ikin, Nils Erik Nielsen, Julie Ryan, Rolf de Heer, 2002.
39. *Rabbit Proof Fence* Director and Producer: Philip Noyce, Screenplay: Christine Olsen, Based on the book by Doris Pilkington, 2002.

## Appendix 2

### The Relations Among Classical Film Theory (1930-1950), Modern Film Theory, The Cognitivists and the Cognitive Film Semioticians.\*

1. CLASSICAL FILM THEORY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Montagists (Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, etc.)</li> <li>(b) Realists (André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, etc.)</li> </ul>
2. MODERN FILM THEORY (a.k.a. 'contemporary' film theory)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Film semiotics (Christian Metz of <i>Film Language, Language and Cinema</i>)</li> <li>(b) Post-structural film theory (a.k.a. second semiotics, psycho-semiotics): Marxist and psychoanalytic film theory of Stephen Heath, Colin MacCabe, Metz of <i>The Imaginary Signifier</i>, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Louis Baudry, Raymond Bellour, etc. (the transition from 2a to 2b was effected by theories of enunciation based on the linguistics of Benveniste).</li> </ul>
3. COGNITIVE FILM THEORY
David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, Edward Branigan, Joseph Anderson, Torben Grodal, Ed tan, Murray Smith.
4. COGNITIVE FILM SEMIOTICS (development from 2a)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) New theories of enunciation (Francesco Casetti, Metz of <i>The Impersonal Enunciation</i>)</li> <li>(b) Semio-pragmatics of film (Roger Odin)</li> <li>(c) Transformational generative grammar and cognitive semantics of film (Michel Colin, Dominique Chateau)</li> </ul>

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\* From: Buckland, Warren (2000) The Cognitive Semiotics of Film, Cambridge University Press, New York, p 3.



### Appendix 3

#### Differences between the cinematic shot and the linguistic word\*

1. Shots are infinite in number, unlike words (since the lexicon is in principle finite) but like statements, an infinity of which can be constructed on the basis of limited number of words.
2. Shots are the creations of the filmmaker, unlike words (which pre-exist in lexicons) but like statements.
3. The shot provides an inordinate amount of information and semiotic wealth.
4. The shot is an actualised unit, unlike the word which is a purely virtual lexical unit to be used as the speaker wishes. The word “dog” can designate any type of dog, and can be pronounced with any accent or intonation, whereas a filmic shot of a dog tells us, at the very minimum, that we are seeing a certain kind of dog of a certain size and appearance, shot from a specific angle with a specific kind of lens. While it is true that filmmakers might “virtualise” the image of a dog through backlighting, soft-focus, or decontextualization, Metz’s more general point is that the cinematic shot more closely resembles an utterance or a statement (“here is the backlit silhouette image of what appears to be a large dog”) than a word.
5. Shots, unlike words, do not gain meaning by paradigmatic contrast with other shots that might have occurred in the same place on the syntagmatic chain. In the cinema, shots form part of a paradigm so open as to be meaningless. (Signs, within the Saussurean schema, enter into two kinds of relationship: paradigmatic, having to do with choices from a virtual, “vertical” set of “comparable possibilities” – e.g. a set of pronouns in a sentence – and syntagmatic, having to do with horizontal, sequential arrangement into a signifying whole. Paradigmatic operations have to do with selecting, while syntagmatic operations have to do with combining in sequence.)

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\* From: Stam, Robert (2000) Film Theory: An Introduction, Blackwell, Oxford, p 111.

## Appendix 4

### Camera Techniques\*

- **Long shot (LS):** Shot which shows all or most of a fairly large subject (for example, a person) and usually much of the surroundings. Extreme Long Shot (ELS) - see establishing shot: In this type of shot the camera is at its furthest distance from the subject, emphasising the background. Medium Long Shot (MLS): In the case of a standing actor, the lower frame line cuts off his feet and ankles. Some documentaries with social themes favour keeping people in the longer shots, keeping social circumstances rather than the individual as the focus of attention.
- **Establishing shot:** Opening shot or sequence, frequently an exterior 'General View' as an Extreme Long Shot (ELS). Used to set the scene.
- **Medium shots:** Medium Shot or Mid-Shot (MS). In such a shot the subject or actor and its setting occupy roughly equal areas in the frame. In the case of the standing actor, the lower frame passes through the waist. There is space for hand gestures to be seen. Medium Close Shot (MCS): The setting can still be seen. The lower frame line passes through the chest of the actor. Medium shots are frequently used for the tight presentation of two actors (the two shot), or with dexterity three (the three shot).
- **Close-up (CU):** A picture which shows a fairly small part of the scene, such as a character's face, in great detail so that it fills the screen. It abstracts the subject from a context. MCU (Medium Close-Up): head and shoulders. BCU (Big Close-Up): forehead to chin. Close-ups focus attention on a person's feelings or reactions, and are sometimes used in interviews to show people in a state of emotional excitement, grief or joy. In interviews, the use of BCUs may emphasise the interviewee's tension and suggest lying or guilt. BCUs are rarely used for important public figures; MCUs are preferred, the camera providing a sense of distance. Note that in western cultures the space within

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\* From: Daniel Chandler,  
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/gramtv.html> (2000)

about 24 inches (60 cm) is generally felt to be private space, and BCUs may be invasive.

- **Point-of-view shot (POV):** A shot made from a camera position close to the line of sight of a performer who is to be watching the action shown in the point-of-view shot. The camera is placed (usually briefly) in the spatial position of a character to provide a subjective point-of-view. This is often in the form of alternating shots between two characters - a technique known as *shot/reverse shot*. Once the 'axis of action' has been established, the alternation of shots with reverse-shots allows the viewer to glance back and forth at the participants in a dialogue (*matched shots* are used in which the shot-size and framing of the subject is similar). In such sequences, some of these shots are *reaction shots*.
- **Wide-angle shot:** A shot of a broad field of action taken with a wide-angle lens.
- **Tilted shot:** When the camera is tilted on its axis so that normally vertical lines appear slanted to the left or right, ordinary expectations are frustrated. Such shots are often used in mystery and suspense films to create a sense of unease in the viewer.
- **Cutaway/cutaway shot (CA):** A bridging, intercut shot between two shots of the same subject. It represents a secondary activity occurring at the same time as the main action. It may be preceded by a definite look or glance out of frame by a participant, or it may show something of which those in the preceding shot are unaware. (See narrative style: parallel development) It may be used to avoid the technical ugliness of a 'jump cut' where there would be uncomfortable jumps in time, place or viewpoint. It is often used to shortcut the passing of time.
- **Reaction shot:** Any shot, usually a cutaway, in which a participant reacts to action which has just occurred.
- **Insert/insert shot:** A bridging close-up shot inserted into the larger context, offering an essential detail of the scene (or a reshooting of the action with a different shot size or angle.)

- **Buffer shot (neutral shot):** A bridging shot (normally taken with a separate camera) to separate two shots which would have reversed the continuity of direction.

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