

THE ABORIGINE IN AUSTRALIAN CINEMA: FROM WALKABOUT TO RABBIT-PROOF FENCE

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines the treatment of Aborigine culture in Australian film through a study of two films separated by thirty years of cinematic history. The similarities and differences between the two films are examined in the light of historical developments in that period, and their respective contributions to the history of national cinema in Australia are outlined. It is argued that the more recent film, despite its significance in the wider acceptance among Australians of the cruel treatment of the Aboriginal population in earlier periods, made itself vulnerable to attacks by pro-colonial critics through its utilisation of Hollywood cinematic conventions. The older film, wholly fictional and stylistically expressionistic, has been criticized as condescending and sentimental, but avoided the exacerbation of social and ethnic divisiveness. The reception and impact of the two films, it is argued, illustrate significant problems confronted in the emergence of national cinemas elsewhere.

Keywords: Australian Cinema, National Cinema, Aborigines, Post-Colonialism

AVUSTURALYA SİNEMASINDA ABORJİNLER: SONSUZ ÇÖLDEN ÇİT'E

ÖZET

Çalışma 30 yıllık sinema tarihiyle birbirinden ayrılan iki film ile Avustralya sinemasında Aborjin kültürüne yaklaşımı incelemektedir. İki film arasındaki benzerlikler ve farklar o dönemdeki tarihsel gelişmeler ışığında incelenmiş ve Avustralya ulusal sinema tarihine sırasıyla olan katkılarının altı çizilmiştir. Daha yakın tarihli film eski yıllarda Aborjinlere yapılan zulmün Avustralyalılar arasında daha geniş bir kabullenme olmasına karşın Hollywood sinematik uygulamaları üzerinden koloni öncesi kritikler ile kendini saldırıya açık bir hale getirmesi tartışılmıştır. Daha eski olan film küçümseyici ve duygusal yönleriyle eleştirilmiştir ancak sosyal ve etnik bölünmenin şiddetinden kendini korumuştur. İki filmin algısı ve etkisinin herhangi başka bir yerdeki ulusal sinemaların acil olarak karşılaştıkları belirli problemleri örneklerle anlatması tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avustralya Sineması, Ulusal Sinema, Aborjinler, Post-Sömürgecilik

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INTRODUCTION: CINEMATIC HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINE

The Aborigine was largely ignored in Australian cinema before *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1970), a film based on James Vance Marshall's novel which told of how two lost white children were found in the bush by an aboriginal boy who leads them over the expanse of trackless wilderness that separate them from the world they have known. There had been a documentary film sympathetic to the Aborigines, *The Back of Beyond*, released in 1955, but for many cinema audiences inside and outside Australia, the first thoughtful cinematic study of aboriginal culture and identity was provided by Roeg's film. Roeg himself was not Australian but British, known only for the surrealist London thriller *Performance* (1970) about delusion and power, starring Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones. Marshall, the author of the book, was also British and *Walkabout* was his first published work. The reception given to the film in Australia was unenthusiastic, partly the reaction to a firmly Australian story being written and screened by little-known British artists or 'outsiders' (McFarlane and Mayer, 1992: 182). The critical appreciation has grown more positive: in recent works, the film is referred to as a 'classic Australian film' (Collins and Davis, 2004: 133), and as the inaugurator of both the 'landscape tradition' in Australian cinema (op. cit. 88) and of the internationally popular Australian Gothic genre of the 1970s and 1980s (Rayner, 2000: 25). *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002), appearing thirty-two years later but comparable to *Walkabout* in terms of narrative and ideology, enjoyed immediate success at the box office, grossing AU\$7.5 million in Australia in its first year and a similar sum in the US (Collins and Davis, 2004: 149 fn.2). The two films thus constitute the first and most recent cinematic treatments of the conflict between the Aboriginal and White cultures in Australia and provide a measure of the developments in Australian cinema in this context.

A key legal development during the intervening period should be noted: the High Court's *Mabo* decision in 1992, which finally dismantled the fiction that Australia at the time of its colonisation by the British was a *terra nullius*, or unoccupied territory. The High Court decision was followed in 1993 by the passing by the Federal Government of the Native Title Act, which formally recognised the pre-existing property rights of the indigenous peoples. Although the presence of the Aborigines in colonial times could not be denied, they had been considered to 'range' the land and not to 'possess' or own it – the same argument that had been used regarding Indian tribes by the white settlers of the United States.

This essay considers *Walkabout* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in the context of the efforts of a national cinema to come to terms with the lack of communication and understanding between colonisers and colonised and the abuse of the human rights of indigenous peoples which was its corollary. It also sets out to examine the problems involved in depicting such issues on

screen, in terms of the tensions between historical and cultural accuracy on the one hand and the requirements of dramatization on the other. The different approaches adopted by the two films, as well as the chronological gap that separates them, exemplify contrasting notions about the part that can be played by cinema in forging a postcolonial multi-ethnic national identity.

The parallels with the history of Australian Aborigines and that of the American Indians are self-evident, but there are also implications for other nations in whose history ethnic and linguistic difference has played a significant part.

1. NARRATIVE AND THEME

Walkabout concerned two children, a teenage girl and her much younger brother, whose mentally unbalanced father drives them far into the outback, attempts to kill them and then sets fire to his car before shooting himself. The children have two tins of fruit, no water and only the school uniforms they were wearing for the excursion with their father. After two days of wandering, they come to a water hole where they drink and bathe, but the water dries up during the night. They are saved from more or less certain death by the arrival of an Aboriginal boy engaged in the solitary 'walkabout' undertaken by male Aborigines as a traditional coming-of-age rite. The central part of the film tells of the journey of the three children through the uninhabited Australian bush, with the Aborigine acting as guide and provider in an environment which to the white children is frightening and hostile but which to him is a familiar habitat able to offer sustenance to the traveller who knows how and where to find it. Gradually the cultural distance between the three characters diminishes as the schoolchildren abandon their urban dress and manners, even allowing their skin to be decorated in Aboriginal style.

The first attempt at communication is the girl's plea for water. 'We need water,' she says plaintively as the Aborigine looks at her in incomprehension. 'Water. Surely anybody can understand that.' The little boy solves the problem by miming the act of drinking, and the Aborigine sinks a hollow reed into the soil of the dry water hole so that they can quench their thirst. In weeks of journeying together, they learn only a few words of each other's language, but the film emphasises that this barrier at least is a superficial one, and there are scenes of the three playing together without awkwardness or restraint. What does disturb them – more particularly the girl – is the element of sexual awareness between the two teenagers, which is briefly and subtly intimated, focusing on the girl's self-consciousness under the boy's gaze. She evidently experiences a degree of inappropriateness in his sexual awareness of her, which can only be rooted in the gulf between them in terms of culture, manners and physical appearance. Out of simple gratitude, and the togetherness of a shared journey, she keeps this feeling in abeyance, and in one scene she is happy enough for him to carry her over a patch of waterlogged ground.

When they arrive at the first outpost of white 'civilisation', an abandoned farmhouse, the girl is affected by the presence of the traces of a life she recognises, while the Aborigine is visibly unsettled by the house, the nearby road and the altered behaviour of the white girl. Out hunting buffalo, he is nearly run over by a car driven by buffalo hunters engaged in culling the herd, whose apparently aimless shooting of many animals mystifies and distresses him. The following morning, he is seen painted all over with vivid black-and-white decorations and performing a strange all-day dance, apparently for the benefit of the girl inside the house, to which she responds with a kind of mute and fearful rejection. The following day, the Aborigine is found dead, hanging from a tree. The brother and sister take to the road and come to a defunct mining camp and from there, it is assumed, make their way to the city. The final scene is of the girl, now grown-up, greeting her husband on his return from work and recalling idyllic scenes from their journey with the Aborigine boy.

Roeg and his scriptwriter (playwright Edward Bond) made two significant changes to the narrative of Marshall's novel. In the book, the children are survivors from a plane crash – there is no father, no attempted murder, no burning car. Also, the Aborigine dies of influenza, a 'white' disease to which he has no immunity, and not by suicide. Thus in the book, the moral lesson of the ending is unmistakable: contact with the Aborigine brought the white children safely through a strange and dangerous land, while contact with them killed him. The alteration made in the film leaves the cause of the boy's suicide unclear. According to Rayner, 'The girl misinterprets the Aborigine's dance of courtship as a prelude to rape, and her rejection prompts him to hang himself' (Rayner, 2000: 26). Collins and Davis suggest that 'the boy was overwhelmed by grief after witnessing a buffalo culling' and that this was 'exacerbated by the girl's rejection of his "marriage proposal" communicated through a spectacular and highly primitivised dance' (Collins and Davis, 2004: 143).

The narrative of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is founded on the actual experiences of three Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their family homes in the Northern Territory in 1931 and taken to a 'Native Settlement' far to the south. The story is taken from the book written by a daughter of the oldest of the three children concerned (Pilkington-Garimara, 1996), and the historical circumstances are confirmed by an official report based on eye-witness accounts (Human Rights Commission, 1997) as well as by reports in contemporary local newspapers. The three children escape from the Native Settlement and walk 1,500 kilometres back to their home in the north, using as their guide the wire fence erected to keep out rabbits which at that time ran north-south through the middle of the country and from which the film takes its name. This feat of determination and endurance on the part of children aged 14, 12 and 8 constitutes the central part of the narrative. O.A. Neville, Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines, played in the film

by British actor Kenneth Branagh, orders a pursuit of the children, with the help of an Aboriginal tracker, and one of the children is recaptured. The two remaining children reach home, are reunited with their families and avoid being retaken by hiding out in the bush.

Various narrative and thematic parallels exist between the two films: both focus on extraordinary journeys through the Australian outback undertaken by children, both are directly concerned (in different ways) with the relationships and conflicts between black and white cultures, both feature the problem of physical survival in a harsh and difficult land, with the associated emphasis on primary considerations such as food, water and weather. The contrasts between the two films are equally self-evident. *Walkabout* is fiction, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is based on fact. The cinematic style of *Walkabout* is expressionist, even at times dreamlike and surreal, while *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, with the exception of one episode (to be examined later), aims at a realistic portrayal of actual events. In *Walkabout*, the landscape is portrayed as marvellous, vivid and dangerous; in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, it is people who are threatening, while the landscape is neutral, coloured according to the cinematographer in 'desaturated' (bleached) colours up to the time when the children return to their own homeland (Becker Entertainment, 2002: 17).

2. PRIMITIVISM AND SENTIMENTALISM

The impact of *Walkabout* on Australian public opinion at the time was minimal, because it was a fictional work written and directed by non-Australians and because the film was released before the larger issues had been widely publicised by ethnic organisations and political activists. For its time, it was 'too strange, too removed from the conventionally accepted images of Australia and its people' (Macfarlane and Mayer, 1992: 182). It was also criticised for its 'primitivist' representation of Aborigines, summed up in the derogatory label "noble savage" (Collins and Davis, 2004: 142-3), a point echoed by Dawson (1971: 228), who refers to the film's 'familiar antitheses – noble savage and corrupt society, paradise lost and urban hell'. These antitheses were explicitly presented. At the start of the film, there are brief images of the 'white' world, including soldiers marching, schoolchildren receiving elocution lessons, people going to work in concrete-and-glass office blocks, the clatter of city traffic, a meat butcher butchering, a smart block of luxury flats with a swimming pool within a few yards of the ocean. The images are accompanied by the strange, soft tones of the Aboriginal didgeridoo, as if in ironic comment on the futility, haste and noise of it all. The prefatory montage comes to an end in the flat of the protagonists where the mother is listening on the radio to lessons on dining room etiquette: 'If there are more than two knives by the side of the plate, use the outside one for the first course, the fish knife for the fish course...' and so on. Later, the children are made to appear ridiculous when going on a picnic in their awkward school

uniforms, with tightly-buttoning jackets and impractical headgear. When the Aboriginal arrives, he does so bounding easily down the sandy slope. His entire possessions for a solitary journey of many months are a staff, a spear and a belt. This contrast is made at once between the grace and simplicity of Aboriginal life and the over-elaboration and artificiality of contemporary urban existence. Later in the film, there is a short scene showing a band of nearly-naked Aborigines coming across the father's burned car and briefly transforming it into a playground vehicle, for jumping on and hanging upside down in and laughing uproariously over. Elsewhere, the swift, sure, casual movements of the Aboriginal boy preparing his prey for the cooking fire are intercut with further scenes from the urban butcher's shop. The image of the boy standing with his tall spear on a hilltop against the background of a red sunset became familiar in English-language bookshops as the jacket design for the paperback edition of the novel: a striking image of solitude, stillness and composure. The traditional manner of hunting – a chase on foot and a spear hurled with deadly aim – is shown repeatedly in the film and the boy's attempt to wrestle a full-grown buffalo to the ground is contrasted with the impersonal culling of the herd by the white hunters. The 'noble savage' in *Walkabout* does not embody a myth or a 'Rousseauesque idea' (Collins and Davis, 2004: 142) but the combination of speed and balance necessary for a hunter and the particular skills taught by a demanding environment. The character of the Aboriginal boy, and his relation to the natural world that nourishes him, seems poignant and striking. An element of anachronistic condescension may be detected in the accusation of 'primitivism', as if Marshall and Roeg could have been aware, in 1970, of the subsequent debates on postcoloniality and ethnic difference. The film's impact depends to a great extent on its ability to convey an innocence or 'nobility' in its central character. The white children are abandoned, almost hopeless, while the Aboriginal is physically and mentally adapted to a world which to all viewers but those with direct experience of the Australian outback is exotic and dangerous.

Rabbit-Proof Fence avoids all stereotyping of the noble savage because by that time (2002), the academic, media and political debates of the intervening period had made such naivety impossible, but also because its protagonists – the three Aboriginal girls – do not hunt animals or sink a reed to suck water or decorate their bodies with paint and dance strange dances. They are brave and resourceful, but their demeanour is not characterised by any unusual cultural practices, partly because of their gender and age but also because the narrative of the film does not demand it. The single exception comes from a very early scene in the film where Molly (the oldest girl) and her family hunt a large monitor lizard, which she pulls down from its refuge in a tree before it is killed. It is an act of self-possession and physical courage unlikely in a white girl of her age, but it is still the exploit of a young child, which the boy's hunting in *Walkabout* is certainly not.

In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the camera generally adopts the point of view of the girls (usually that of Molly), while in *Walkabout* the treatment of the Aborigine boy is never subjective. Even though he is depicted as kind, skilful and brave, he is always kept at a distance by the camera, just as his ignorance of English excludes him from the (understood) dialogue. When he talks, he does so in his native tongue. The viewers of the film hear what the children hear, without subtitled translation. The story belongs to the white children, and theirs is the dominant, in fact the only, point of view. It is the objectification of the Aboriginal's character that makes possible the charge of 'primitivism', which always implies a distance.

One further example may illustrate the point: the cinematic treatment of the landscape in *Walkabout*. Referring to the 'landscape' or 'pastoral' traditions in Australian film, Collins and Davis argue that this tradition was initiated by *Walkabout* (2004: 88, 141) with its deliberate exoticism, its rich colours, a sense that the landscape is 'iconic'. Louis Nowra wrote of the film: 'The images of the Outback were of an almost hallucinogenic intensity ... everything seemed acute, shrill, incandescent, haunting' (Nowra, 2003). O'Regan suggests that the rationale for the intense otherness of the landscape is to be found in the film's implication that Aboriginality alone provided 'the keys to an experience of Australian landscape' (O'Regan, 1985: 247). Elsewhere, the same critic contrasts the film with *The Man from Snowy River* (Miller, 1982) which 'posed a much more ordinary, banal and pragmatic relation with the bush' (O'Regan, 1996: 138). In these comments, the 'noble savage' idea is transcribed into an equivalent attitude towards the land, which becomes something exotic and extraordinary, the enshrinement of an idea.

O'Regan's observations are especially suggestive in coming from a man who himself had (non-Aboriginal) experience of the outback as a child and young man, insisting that there was no reason but ignorance for people to feel 'alienated' from the landscape. It was this alienation, he argued, that had given rise to a glamorised screen version, as in *Walkabout* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (O'Regan, 1985: 246). This is another way of referring to the 'distance' referred to above: it is impossible to glamorise something with which a person is genuinely familiar.

Negative criticism of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* centres not around primitivism but sentimentalism. 'The film is not about facts,' Akerman wrote, 'it's about sentiments' (Akerman, 2002). Certain scenes of the film are undeniably sentimental, notably the black tracker's growing admiration for the girls he is pursuing (which naturally did not feature in the book) and also in certain aspects of the reunion scene when the girls finally reach their homeland. The women apparently give strength to the exhausted girls by means of their traditional chanting, even though the girls are still many miles away. Collins and Davis's description captures the sentimentality of the moment: 'To the sound of soaring music, Molly lifts her exhausted younger

sister in her arms and carries her towards home' (2004: 145). The film's unmistakable intention is that viewers should identify with the three girls and at the critical junctures of the narrative – the initial capture when they are grabbed by policeman and bundled into a car, the way they are caged like small animals in the train going south, their confrontation with the stern, rigid routines of the Native Settlement, the middle-distance shots of them as they traipse wearily over the outback under the burning sun or pelting rain – the camera pictures them as persecuted and heroic. Director Phillip Noyce, whose previous credits included mainstream Hollywood movies such as *Patriot Games* starring Harrison Ford and Samuel Jackson, admitted in an interview that he was using skills learned from Hollywood, where 'they know how to reach audiences'. His aim, he explained, was 'to sell an Indigenous story to the mainstream' (quoted by Collins and Davis, 2004: 137).

Viewer identification with the central characters was clearly essential to this aim. D'Aeth argues: 'Empathy is indeed the key premise of a film like *Rabbit-Proof Fence*' (D'Aeth, 2002: 2), referring in particular to the scene in which Molly is summoned from among the children at the Settlement to be inspected by Neville. During her walk up to meet Neville, 'We are placed in empathetic occupation of Molly's body, not just through the typical method of a hand-held first-person camera shot, but by the overdubbing of Molly's breathing. Our "being" Molly is sanctioned by the empathetic imperative of Hollywood film' (op. cit.: 8). The arousal of sentiment in the viewer is one means of establishing empathy, but the semantic distinction between empathy and sentimentality is a delicate one. The significance of the distinction is that sentimentalism can be argued as detracting from, or distorting, the historical accuracy and ideological purpose of the film.

In line with the 'imperatives' of Hollywood, the screenplay of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* opted to centre the narrative around a hunt or chase, cross-cutting between the flight of the girls and the measures taken by the authorities to recapture them. This involved the insertion of imagined scenes of the Protector's office and the pursuit by policemen and tracker into the account of the flight based on Molly Craig's memory of the events. Although the girls knew they were likely to have been followed, they never saw their pursuers and were ignorant of Neville's response to their escape and so neither of these played a part in Pilkington-Garimara's book. It may be argued that the subject of the book was 'the escape' and that of the film 'the hunt'. Although pains were taken by scenarist and director to depict these inserted scenes in a historically authentic manner (Noyce, 2002: 99), there is an undeclared mingling of the real and the imagined in the film, designed to heighten the drama and broaden the scope of the narrative so that it can encompass the attitude of the authorities. Such a device is accepted as a key element in all historical drama, yet it is here that the tension between historical fact and screen dramatisation emerges. The problem is compounded by the choice of contemporary Hollywood's favourite dramatic motif – the chase – to dramatis

the events and emotionally to engage the audience, laying the film open to charges such as Akerman's that it is no more than 'a Tinseltown version of an Australian story' (Akerman, 2002).

3. IDEOLOGY AND HISTORY IN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL CINEMA

It is now widely accepted that between 10 and 30 percent of all Aboriginal children born in Australia between 1900 and 1970 were taken from their homes to be brought up in state-run 'settlements', ostensibly to protect children of mixed descent from hostility or neglect on the part of pure-bred Aborigines. Some doubt remains over the number of children involved, but even if the minimum figure (10%) of the Human Rights report is accepted, the total would have been many thousands. D'Aeth suggests a figure of 100,000 (D'Aeth, 2002: 4). O.A. Neville, as Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines for 25 years, was largely responsible for implementing this policy in the 1930s and afterwards. Neo-conservative critics of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* have argued that the film distorted the nature and aim of the measures, claiming that that they were designed to protect the children and see that they were properly cared for, and that the film was guilty of misrepresenting Neville's character and motives (Akerman, 2002: 89).

This is contradicted by the historical record, as the director argued strongly in his response to Akerman's article (Noyce, 2002: 99). The actual motive for removing the children was admitted by the Secretary at the Department of the Interior in 1933, who referred to the necessity for 'breeding out the colour', by 'mating half-castes with whites' (Pilger, 2002: 228 n.36). Neville himself is quoted in *Bringing Them Home* as asking rhetorically at a conference: 'Are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the Commonwealth or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there ever were any Aborigines in Australia?' (Human Rights Commission, 1997). Another Chief Protector of Aborigines is quoted by Tatz as saying: 'I would not hesitate to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring' (Tatz, 1998). What was involved, in fact, was 'the failed and discredited eliminationist history of Euro-American eugenics' (D'Aeth, 2002: 7) endorsed by the 'Protectors' and by the politicians at the Department of the Interior.

In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the thinking behind the policy is explained by Neville to an attentive gathering of white citizens. His address is illustrated by photographic slides showing how the dark pigmentation of an Aborigine can be 'bred out' in four generations by intermarriage with whites. Neville is portrayed as dedicated to the point of obsession but not as deliberately cruel or inhuman. The impression is of an unimaginative and insensitive government

officer intent on doing what he perceives as his duty. 'The Native must be helped in spite of himself,' he declares in the film. The theory and practice of 'eugenics' was widely sanctioned by officialdom during the 1930s, not only in Australia but also in European countries and in the US, and in this respect Neville was a typical functionary of his age. Branagh's portrayal of him in the film is marked by a cool, unemotional professionalism.

As Pilger points out, the admission that a form of ethnic cleansing had been going on well into the second half of the twentieth century was hard for many Australians to accept, and many did not. Members of the conservative group associated with the magazine *Quadrant* saw in such accusations a denigration of 'the heroic story of white Australia by the manufacture and exaggeration of evidence of Aboriginal suffering and resistance' (Pilger, 2002: 193). *Bringing Them Home* divided the country into those who felt shame at what had been done and those who felt angry at the way the facts had been presented. The release of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, five years after the report, transformed what were essentially statistics into a flesh-and-blood tragedy, undeniably affecting Australian public opinion as well as making the issue known internationally. Collins and Davis (2004: 133) describe *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as 'the film of the *Stolen Generations*, providing a set of powerful images that captured the popular imagination of both young and older Australians'. The most powerful image, it may be assumed, was that of the children stolen away from their homes, an idea shocking to any parent. "What if the Government kidnapped your daughter?" a North American poster for the film asked. The advertisement was seen by conservative critics as 'sensationalising, misleading and grossly distorting' (Adnum, 2002).

The debate over *Bringing Them Home* – which provided the essential documentary evidence for the film – was intensified by the finding of the commission that the policy of forcible separation constituted genocide under the terms of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Pilger, 2002: 179). The emotive word 'genocide', which to people unaware of the semantic compass of the term meant mass slaughter, increased the indignation felt by many ordinary Australians that their country's treatment of the Aborigines should be equated with the Nazi's 'final solution' for the Jews or the horrors of the Bosnian war. Even in Australian historiography, the word does not appear, as Tatz pointed out: 'Almost all historians of the Aboriginal experience – black or white – avoid it. They write about pacifying, killing, cleansing, excluding, exterminating, starving, poisoning, shooting, beheading, sterilising, exiling, removing – but avoid genocide. Are they ignorant of genocide theory and practice? Or simply reluctant to taint "the land of the fair" with so heinous a label?' (Tatz, 1998).

Rabbit-Proof Fence drew no explicit parallel with Nazi racial policies of the 1930s and 1940s, although the scene in which Neville examines Molly to see if her skin was pale enough for selection for a special school would have

recalled the practices of Nazism to some members of the audience. In Pilkington-Garimara's book, Molly's first impression of the Native Settlement was that 'it looked more like a concentration camp than a residential school for Aboriginal children' (Pilkington-Garimara, 1996: 70), but the film did not reiterate this impression. Although the school was grim, severe and deficient in basic amenities, it was recognisably a school rather than a concentration camp, as the lack of obstacles to the children's escape demonstrated.

The achievement of Rabbit-Proof Fence was that it 'brought the issue of the Stolen Generations into the most affectively powerful and demographically penetrating of media' (D'Aeth, 2002: 8). Excerpts from *Bringing Them Home* in newspapers or discussions on television were incapable of producing the same emotional response. Newspaper readers learning of children being forcibly removed by the State from their homes might experience shock or anger, but if they saw it enacted on the screen, they could be moved to tears – and often were (D'Aeth op. cit.).

CONCLUSION: FACT AND FICTION IN NATIONAL CINEMA

The issue for a national cinema is how to employ its power so as to heal the divisions within a society. While Rabbit-Proof Fence had the effect of breaking down the barriers to understanding white Australia's failure to reach a legitimate and just *modus vivendi* with the country's Aboriginals, it also polarised opinion within the white community itself, involving accusations of 'un-Australianism' and even 'treachery' (see Collins and Davis, 2004: 135-6). This indicated the existence of two conflicting versions of what the Australian national identity was, or should be – the one conservative and pro-British, holding to the traditional view of Australian history as shaped by hardworking, well-intentioned British colonialists supported by tough white stockmen and farmers, and the other increasingly committed to a cosmopolitan, urban-oriented and multi-ethnic view bearing a closer relation to the realities of post-1970s Australia. Since these two groups to an extent paralleled the parliamentary divide (between the Liberal and Labour parties), the same conflict of opinions was played out on the national stage. When Labour Prime Minister Keating declared in 1992 that 'we the people' should take responsibility for the 'theft of land and other crimes' against the Aboriginals, it provoked outrage in the Conservative opposition (Collins and Davis, 2004: 5-6). The report *Bringing Them Home* was also commissioned by the Keating administration. When the Liberals returned to power, the new Prime Minister Howard refused to apologise in the name of the nation for what had been done to Aboriginal families, let alone offer some form of compensation (Pilger, 2002: 179).

By definition, the function of a national cinema cannot include the exacerbation of internal divisions, indicating the need for a strategic approach.

In the case of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, it may be argued that the appeal to sentiment, the dramatisation of the chase and the choice of promotional material, served to detract from the film's authenticity and, specifically, to make the film vulnerable to charges of distortion and exaggeration. There is a sense in which, of the two films considered in this essay, *Walkabout* has been able to play the more incontrovertible role, precisely because it is fiction and never pretends to be anything else. The actual extent of its influence is hard to determine, because it is scarcely possible at this juncture to unearth the wealth of allusion and reference which would be needed. It is also difficult to distinguish the influence of the film from that of the novel, which has regularly featured on school syllabuses internationally over the last thirty years, and for many students of twentieth century literature still provides the first introduction to the world of the Australian Aborigine (although since it was the film that led to the success of the novel, there is perhaps no need to insist on such a distinction). Certainly the term, and traditional practice, of the 'walkabout' was internationally popularised by the film. Three decades after the film's release, it has given its name to three contemporary songs (by Hot Chile Peppers, Bjork and Atlas Sound) and to episodes in three recent television series (including *Lost*). It is also several times referred to in Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia* (2008) where the Aboriginal boy insists on his right to undertake the traditional rite of passage.

In their analyses of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, both D'Aeth and Collins and Davis compare the film with *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993), notably in terms of the contemporary epilogue with which both films end. To Collins and Davis, 'the flash-forward to the real-life subjects of the film, shot in the documentary mode ... reinforces the film's claim to historical truth: the existence of the real-life subjects validates the authenticity of the story' (Collins and Davis, 2004: 145). D'Aeth adds that the ending ruptures 'the fundamental representational premise of realist cinema that the screen is a window onto a fully-realised historical world', arguing that the films thereby 'actualise their aspirations to documentary status' (D'Aeth, 2002: 5). Neither argument seems convincing. The authenticity of the story is validated (or not) by innumerable details within the narrative, and 'documentary status' can hardly be conferred by an epilogue when the main body of the film is 'structured according to the dictates of classic Hollywood, including its demand for narrative closure' (D'Aeth op. cit.).

Indisputably, films based on fictional stories enjoy a greater narrative freedom than those based on fact and intrinsically stand outside the 'history wars' endemic in the struggle to establish a legitimate and inclusive national identity. They can be criticised on aesthetic and ideological grounds but not on the matter of historical accuracy or factual misrepresentation. An instructive example can be found in John Ford's film *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), based on Steinbeck's novel, which has been responsible, to a greater extent than any other film set in the US of the 1930s, for representing to American and

international audiences the physical conditions and social impact of the Great Depression. Kolker sees the film as the supreme example of 'how direct a definition of Depression politics and economics can be rendered, even within the Hollywood convention of personalizing the political' (Kolker, 2000: 36). The Joads are a fictional family undertaking an imagined journey, yet the period details are authentic and the story forceful and dramatic without sentimentality or melodrama. Whether Walkabout can ever achieve such a uniquely influential status is doubtful, yet in terms of its role in articulating both the enduring qualities of a pre-colonial, pre-industrial culture and the limitations of the social and educational systems which were responsible for its near-demise, it remains a powerful statement.

It may be argued that the significance of Walkabout, now over forty years old, and even of Rabbit-Proof Fence, irreversibly associated with the politics of the 1990s, is being overtaken by that of a third Australian cinema, alternative to both. The film *Ten Canoes* (de Heer and Djigirr, 2006) featured an all-Aboriginal cast, an Aboriginal director and authentic oral tales of Aboriginal culture, with a whimsical, interrogative commentary given by David Gulpilil, who played the Aboriginal lead in Walkabout and the tracker in Rabbit-Proof Fence. In this film, the viewer sees a version of Aboriginal life free of all Hollywood convention and, naturally, of any notion of condescension or sentimentalism. The fragmented narrative, constructed around tales within tales drawn from various generations, makes for cinema that is more demanding for the viewer and poses very different issues. These are no longer concerned with black-white tensions, but with the specific tenor and qualities of Aboriginal culture. This version of 'Third Cinema' (see Willemsen, 1989: passim), characterised precisely by its attempt to 'define and create an authentic prior culture before contamination by the West' (Naficy, 2001: 31) is presented by definition in a form unfamiliar to cinema audiences in Australia and elsewhere. It will therefore require a certain passage of time before it can be objectively assessed by critics and viewers alike. Even then it is unlikely to erode the significance of as Walkabout and Rabbit-Proof Fence as representations textured and defined by the particular historical moments that gave rise to them.

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