Transnational Glamour, National Allure: Community, Change and Cliché in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*.

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What are the links between stories and the wider social world—the contextual conditions for stories to be told and for stories to be received? What brings people to give voice to a story at a particular historical moment? ... and as the historical moment shifts, what stories may lose their significance and what stories may gain in tellability? (Plummer 25).

The vantage points from which we customarily view the world are, as William James puts it, 'fringed forever by a more' that outstrips and outruns them (Jackson 23-24).

Poetry from the future interrupts the habitual formation of bodies, and it is an index of a time to come in which what today exists potently—even if not (yet) effectively— but escapes us will find its time. (Keeling, 'Looking for M—' 567)

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The first time I saw Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* I laughed till I cried. To be exact, I cried laughing at dinner after watching the film with a group of old friends at an inner suburban cinema in Sydney. During the screening itself I laughed *and* I cried. As so often in the movies, our laughter was public and my tears were private, left to dry on my face lest the dabbing of a tissue or an audible gulp should give my emotion away. The theatre was packed that night with a raucously critical audience groaning at the dialogue, hooting at moments of high melodrama (especially Jack Thompson's convulsive death by stampeding cattle) and cracking jokes at travesties of history perceived on screen. After the World War II 'bombing of Darwin' sequence a fictitious 1941 land invasion of 'Mission Island' (Bathurst Island) by Japanese troops had people around me in stitches; when a closing title declared that the government 'officially abandoned the assimilation policy for indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory in 1973', one wag called out: 'at the end of the Japanese Occupation!'. The communal wave of hilarity swept on through a riotous dinner with people enacting their favourite worst scenes and improvising new ones, remaking the film like children playing charades. We did this for hours. It was a wonderful night and in the midst of it my ambivalence about the film that had brought us together dissolved into admiration for its bonding and *stirring* power as a cinematic event.

To be stirred or stirred up by a film is an affective response that informs but also 'outruns', in Michael Jackson's words, the moment of occupying a customary 'vantage point' from which we distribute praise or disapproval to a text (23-24). This energetic spilling over can happen in any kind of encounter with a film; as Felicity Collins points out in an important article on the role of a national screen culture in the digital age, the circulation of audiovisual texts today is multiplatform, crossing between 'public screens, televisions, home theatres, personal computers and hand-held devices' (68, 75), and thus indefinite in its temporal as

well as spatial unfolding (68). In some conditions, however, a film framed as a 'national' event' may organize cinematic spaces of 'affective engagement and ethical response' (69) to socio-political issues by *reframing* images of violence and suffering that have their impact dulled by daily media normalization[1]. The release of a blockbuster film outrageously entitled *Australia* certainly created spaces of engagement in this country and other English language markets where viewers may be aware of the racist colonial history from which the film's romance is made[2]. Since that first, intensely local experience of seeing the big screen version with an audience at least partially sharing a familiarity with matters of Australian history, I have seen *Australia* several times on DVD, alone and in company; explored its circulation on YouTube with international students who showed me foreign market versions of the *Australia*-themed commercials Luhrmann made for Tourism Australia (Cook 139-140; Stadler and Mitchell); and participated in an unusual public conference about the film at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra[3]. Scholarly articles and a vast accumulation of popular responses to *Australia* and its handling of Aboriginal-settler history are in print and on-line, and shortly after the film's theatrical release in late 2008 news media in Australia and the UK featured a serious critical stoush between Marcia Langton, a leading Aboriginal scholar-activist-actor who loved the film, and Germaine Greer, a famous expatriate white feminist who loathed it.

How does this sense of eventfulness arise, and how do these spaces of engagement involve film viewers in the narrative of a 'national' reframing? Cinema's ordinary industrial story-telling about any local film production includes multi-platform media features about the reviews, the debates and the box office performance as well as about the director, the stars and the making of the film, and this discursive dimension plays a significant role. *Australia* had and was said from the outset to have the kind of reception that we politely call 'mixed'

and that Laleen Jayamanne more correctly describes as polarizing (132)[4]. A divided response has greeted all 'Bazmark' films since the widely loved *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) first brought Luhrmann's collaboration with designer Catherine Martin to film-world attention and Pam Cook suggests in a study of their entrepreneurial strategies that stories of controversy play an important role in the 'branding' of their work (4). *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) created contention not only with their aesthetic hyperbole (Cook 64-67) and their renewal of early popular theatrical sensibilities and performance modes (melodrama, burlesque, travesty and pastiche) but also by troubling canonical authorship norms (*Romeo + Juliet*; Cook, 73-8) and appropriating Bollywood to Hollywood (*Moulin Rouge*!; Gopal and Moorti). With *Australia* a much sharper kind of controversy was invited by the decision to combine a staple romance fantasy of cross-class miscegenation in which an English aristocrat, here 'Lady Sarah Ashley' (Nicole Kidman) falls for a colonial spunk (Hugh Jackman as 'Drover')[5] with the classic Australian settler legitimation story in which a white couple in the outback fosters a beautiful and conveniently motherless indigenous child ('Nullah', played by Brandon Walters).

In Australian cinema the legitimation story is familiar from Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955) and from Tracey Moffatt's influential revision of the adoption scenario from a black daughter's perspective in *Night Cries* (1989). By 2008, however, the public 'contextual conditions' (Plummer 25) for again retelling this story included the national Apology that year to the Stolen Generations of mixed race children taken from their indigenous families for assimilation into white society (mentioned in the framing of the film) and an ongoing bitter debate about the Intervention launched by the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response to social breakdown and violence against women and children in remote Aboriginal communities[6]. *Australia* pinched hard on every raw nerve exposed in the nation's long

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recovery from the White Australia policy and the Assimilation era in indigenous affairs, and yet this agonizing material was handled in a Baz-brand high camp style liberally varied with low comedy, loaded with in-jokes and references (Nullah's dog is called 'Jedda') and linked to a splashy tourism campaign ('See the Movie, See the Country') featuring the indigenous child star of the film as an enchanting native guide (Hogan 73-74).

Across this varied activity what strikes me forcibly is the sheer creativity that this film stirs up in its critics, as though they too feel impelled to remake the film in the act of writing about it and in the process to trace, however lightly, varying hopes for something better, something *more* in a future Australian cinema. Critics collapsing truth and political integrity with documentary realism savaged *Australia*'s historical imagination ('a fraudulent and misleading fantasy' wrote Greer). Those who believe that any good film should be trim, taut and tonally consistent attacked its aesthetic longueurs ('the pace of a steamroller with engine trouble', Schembri qtd in 'Australia') and its genre instability ('lurches drunkenly from crazy comedy to Mills and Boonish melodrama', Naglazas qtd in 'Australia'); while others, craving a cinema of novelty and urban sophistication, regretted the film's shameless reiteration of 'time-honoured Antipodean clichés' ('this is the kind of movie, you would imagine, that Steve Irwin would have loved'; Malkin). A hilarious blend of all three lines of attack is 'Baz Luhrmann's Australia: Epic Tosh', a review by Paul McInnes of the British DVD release that condenses the 165 minute film to a 15-speech script for a Victorian stage melodrama complete with exclamatory stage directions. McInnes is most biting about the sidekick roles accorded Aboriginal characters, especially the self-sacrifice of Drover's friend and brother-in-law Magarri (David Ngoombujarra) to save the 'half-caste' children abandoned on Mission Island: 'MAGARRI: You go Drover! Take the kids back to safety! I'll hold off the Japs! And, inevitably, die …'.

On the positive side, *Australia* has inspired efforts to think the imaginative force of cinema beyond a representational etiquette of instant recognition that condemns any use of popular clichés (such as 'fetishised white masculinity'; Hogan 65) as though they are static markers of a legacy that always remains the same. In contrast, Marcia Langton embraced *Australia* for its active qualities: 'Baz Luhrmann has leaped over the ruins of the "history wars"' and given Australians a new past'. Building on her earlier work on the transformative potential of media, in which she famously defined Aboriginality as a field of intersubjectivity that is 'remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation' ('*Well I heard it on the radio ...*' 33), Langton sees *Australia* as in fact a 'radical departure from conventional outback lore', one giving a 'credible rendition' of the predicament lived by mixed-race children in the Northern Territory within the 'complicated caste system' prevailing there in the 1940s (including the segregated cinemas she experienced herself in Queensland as a child; see also Nugent). What works for Langton as an alternative historical vision, however, is the *inclusiveness* of the film's 'pride in the ingenuity, bawdiness and larrikinism of Australians of Aboriginal, British, Chinese and European descent living side by side' in a particular place and time.

Langton knows outback lore as well as outback life and rather than taking offence at familiar stereotypes she reads the changes wrought in them and thus in the national story by the film's distribution of *diverse* kinds of agency across the full social range of characters. In a similar spirit of embracing the film's tonal and generic shifts, Laleen Jayamanne admiringly calls *Australia* a '"preposterous" national epic'. Placing herself in the epic field as a potentially 'preposterous Australian' (141), she seeks to 'conceptualize the film's fleeting and inventive signs so as to understand their compositional principles' (132). This return to critical first principles allows her to model a way of taking the materiality of art design

seriously as an object of enquiry ('the ontological texture of the image', 141); to propose a new theory of Australian 'acting in strobe' (136); and to argue by these means that *Australia*'s historical vision is not misleading but liberating in that it frees time and history from 'chronological articulation', thus enabling 'acts of storytelling that deflect the arrow of time' (131).

Australia is unmistakably a film about the power of story-telling (and singing) to change the world: acts of 'magic!' as Nullah often affirms. This is a pragmatist philosophy of art and a film criticism attuned to extracting social movement categories from paraphrased plots and 'representations' is not always well equipped to grasp what *happens* in high impact cinema such as Luhrmann's, or indeed in the theatre as people respond physically and emotionally to the communal as well as sensory dimension of a wider cinematic event. How might we grasp the affective force of those dimensions and their possibly 'potent' relation to future processes of social and cultural change? Borrowing a phrase from Marx, Kara Keeling conceptualises this potency as 'poetry from the future', marking an affect that escapes recognition yet 'exists as an impossible possibility within our shared reality' ('Looking for M–', 566-567). In what follows I focus on aspects of the work of the cinematic cliché in order to consider what *Australia*'s story-telling might mean for a screen culture that must negotiate its own absorption in a transnational image economy—not least in terms of the media memories and attachments that an audience may bring to a film—in order to sustain more local spaces of involvement that may compose a national framework for engagement.

Let me stress that 'cliché' does not signify aesthetic failure here. Initially I follow Ruth Amossy's account of clichés as 'reading effects' in which 'lexically full figures felt to be shopworn or hackneyed' (Riffaterre qted in Amossy 34) emerge through a reader's 'act of

recognition' that is historically and socially specific; cliché is a modern concept, carrying an aesthetic ambivalence about repetition that had no place in classical rhetorics for which creativity and imitation were convergent rather than opposed. In 'cursory' reading a cliché can be quickly appropriated and absorbed; the 'passively registered' cliché plays functional roles in reading, including the provision of 'reality' effects and the sending of genre signals (36). A reader's *active* recognition of cliché is thus decisive today: when a repetition is perceived as mechanical or as 'parroting', cliché 'appears to be something that dis-originates: at one and the same time, it erases origins and strips away originality'. Cliché for Amossy is experienced then as alienating. 'Repetition', she writes, 'throws the [stock] figure into limitless circulation in which it is exchanged and replicated *ad infinitum*'. Spoken thus by 'an anonymous voice', cliché is identified both as 'common property' and as 'the sign of a dizzying expropriation' by the reader who recognizes a 'speech that is both his own and radically foreign to him' (35).

While this accounts for the angry or wincing recognition that critics such as Greer and Malkin accord *Australia*'s retelling of 'our/*not*-our' Antipodean stories, I diverge from Amossy's model at this point. Film blockbuster consumption differs in material ways from the post-Romantic literary reading that Amossy takes as a norm, not least because these financially gargantuan productions are and must be 'classical' in their embrace of the creative powers of repetition and imitation. Aspiring to cross linguistic, social and cultural boundaries galore to capture a global audience, blockbusters are meticulously crafted from clichés: the story must be known and the characters typical, give or take a twist; the film grammar and the semiotic substance of music, sounds, dialogue, costume, set design and choreography must be easily grasped; and, as in classical rhetoric, the pursuit of excellence (now research-based and primarily digital) occurs on the plane of performance and execution. Blockbusters are duly

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famed for special effects, but this aspect has most impact in the theatrical phase of the profit chain that begins a much longer, nomadic life for an audio-visual product; even a technical masterpiece such as James Cameron's *Avatar 3D* must also be able to thrive as a common story realized in two mundane dimensions for digital download, for VCD, DVD or Blu-ray editions of varying qualities, capacities and price-tags, or, in most of the world to this day, as an ordinary TV broadcast or as a video-tape. At this level, a blockbuster stands or falls on the inventiveness and delicacy of its handling of cliché.

In the first section below I draw on Amossy's work to reflect on the work of cliché in a particular scene from *Australia* in which a vision of story-telling is developed in dialogue and sound. Since *Australia* belongs to a recent mode of 'transnationally national' cinema that participates in the global blockbuster economy while also reworking cultural materials that are nationally significant, for an approach to the role that industrial story-telling plays in making this possible I turn in the second section to Marshall McLuhan's notes on cliché as a mode of perception requiring involvement, rather than passive absorption or expropriation (which may be one, but only one, modality of involvement). The last section returns to the theatrical situation and the issue of the relationship between cinema and cultural change. There I draw on Kara Keeling's account of cinematic cliché as a particular kind of 'common sense' that involves both bodily and mental eventfulness (*The Witch's Flight* 14-15). Construed this way, common sense may of course include the sensation that Amossy describes of being expropriated by clichés affirmed as 'common property' that we recognize as such and yet cannot or do not wish to own.

This is why 'cliché' is a popular term for embarrassing heritage materials ('time-honoured Antipodean clichés') and it is important to ask 'embarrassing for whom, and why?'

Conversely, it is important to ask what happens when large popular audiences *fail to recognize* cultural memories that others would like us to own, whether by perceiving them critically as clichés or else by receiving them as newly localised elements of a global Hollywood heritage. Asking these questions, my interest overall is in what it is that clichés *do*, whether they do it in a shared movement of embarrassment or of laughter, tears, boredom, censoriousness—or of joy in inventing new worst scenes for a film.

The bad storyteller, or cliché as ellipsis

Australia is structured by set-piece speeches about stories. To begin with, a voice-over narration frames the whole epic as a child's lesson in why story-telling matters. In one significant shift away from conventional outback lore, the narrator is not a white pioneer or a roving journalist but Nullah—the little boy who darts in and out of the social groupings on Faraway Downs, a vast cattle station a long way inland from Darwin. With no other child of his tenuous status nearby, Nullah is a limited narrator who witnesses much that he half-understands in the adult spaces he frequents: the homestead, the native camp, the stockyard, the bush. The unacknowledged son of Neil Fletcher (David Wenham), a white manager and the principal villain, Nullah lives around the station with his Aboriginal mother Daisy (Ursula Yovich), communicating in secret with his grandfather, King George (David Gulpilil), a powerful elder from Arnhem Land. Like the '*myall*' (free) Aboriginal figure Marbuk played by Robert Tudawali in *Jedda*, but unlike Marbuk a bearer of indigenous law, King George watches over the station from a mountain nearby. During the first scene at the billabong, where we witness with Nullah the murder of Lord Ashley, we learn that King George was teaching him on that day in 1939 to catch fish using 'magic song' and 'the most important

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lesson of all—tell'um story'. At the end of his own story two years later—having lost his mother, faced a stampede on a cliff-top, driven cattle across the Never-Never, beaten the cattle baron 'King Carney' (Bryan Brown) in a race to port, been kidnapped by police and then bombed in a Japanese air raid—Nullah confides that he now understands 'the most important of all' is actually '*why* we tell stories'. What matters is what stories do; the song catches fish and draws people to you but story-telling keeps people 'belonging always'.

Story-telling, then, is a way of sustaining community while singing is a mode of allure that draws elements together in a fluency of composition that includes the station's Cantonese cook, 'Sing Song' (Yuen Wah). Other speeches at key moments play variations on Nullah's theory. In Drover's hard-boiled version, expounded to Lady Sarah on her first drive to Faraway Downs, a story is a source of personal identity ('the only thing you really own') and something to style, a product of actions and choices ('Just trying to live a good one'). While the febrile new chum Sarah has the narrative task of getting things wrong at this point, she easily slots Drover into the European genre ('oh, an adventure story!') to which he far from exclusively belongs ('just like my husband'). Drover's model later suffers a more chastening critique from Magarri. Having married an Aboriginal woman who died because of a racist medical system, Drover prefers to situate himself in a native Australian genre ('as good as black'). With his talk of 'owning' a story, Drover invokes but individualizes Aboriginal concepts whereby the rights to a particular story derive from interpersonal relationships and responsibilities entailed by belonging to country (Muecke 62). Assuming the role of cultural mediator, Drover later insists to Sarah that Nullah must leave for country with King George to be initiated into his story. However, when an outraged Magarri finds that Drover has used this 'blackfella business' as a way of refusing responsibility for Nullah when the boy disappears (taken, in fact, by the police), Magarri accuses Drover of having no story because,

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in his fear of pain, he has no love in his heart ('You've got nothing. No dreaming, no story. Nothing').

Interpreting the drama as it unfolds, these speeches stitch together a European discourse of film enchantment ('adventure and romance', the film's opening titles promise) with time-honoured European stereotypes of indigenous cultural practice—going walkabout, singing people to you, initiation. In other scenes, story-telling melds with singing on screen as performance rather than discourse. Featuring the cultural extremes of Hollywood magic and the sorcery of King George, these scenes create a space of sonic analogy where opposites echo each other. MacInnes jokes that *Australia* could not be a musical ('no matter how much …the director might have wished it') because that genre 'could not address the terrible plight of the Aborigines' ('Epic Tosh'). If the singing of King George and Nullah counts as music along with 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'—performed in the film by Sarah, Nullah, the accountant Kipling Flynn (Jack Thompson) and Magarri as well as by Judy Garland—then *Australia* is indeed a musical of sorts, a *mélo-drame* or music-drama (Smith 2-3) emphasizing Aboriginal power rather than plight. Europeans as well as Aboriginal people work magic in this version of outback lore[7], but the indigenous characters better articulate and regulate its practice. Singing is magic understood as a controlled, empirically predictable way of acting on the world; facing a stampede, Nullah can 'sing down fear', while King George sings the drovers to water across the desert by correctly following the song-lines that traverse the country.

Clichés, hocus-pocus, 'ooga-booga' … I remember every one of these Aboriginality stereotypes, often literally in the form of cartoons, from my school magazines and children's books in the 1950s. Like the (fully persuasive and dignified) image of Gulpilil standing on

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one leg with his spear, this iconic material is so 'entangled' (Healy 4) in a history of white cultural and territorial appropriation of Aboriginal heritage that for Australians it cannot be passively registered; for some viewers now it can only be rejected as shameful, regardless of whether hunter-gatherers do stand like that, or how many times a party lost in the bush or desert has in reality been saved from a terrible plight by Aboriginal people and their knowledge of country. However, as Chris Healy points out, the understandable impulse to 'conceal' such images contributes to a process of forgetting that makes Aborigines disappear; it is 'to hide from the past in the present' (4). The narcissism of colonial auto-critique can also become a force against change that creates its own imaginative desert ('don't go there!'), making it harder for artists who address large audiences to work with cultural traditions that are familiar, highly charged and perhaps most in need of revision.

The story-telling performance in *Australia* that interests me most in this respect occurs when Sarah goes to 'mother' Nullah after Daisy's death in the water tank where she was hiding her son from the police. Framed in mid-shot as an angular icon of stiff elegance, cool as a Sonia Delaunay geometric design while winding down from the explosive glamour with which she arrived on the Darwin docks (Cook 126-7), Sarah hesitantly enters the native humpy where Nullah is grieving, clears a place to sit down, and in a universal gesture of adult magic, offers to comfort the child with a story. She doesn't really have one to tell but when Nullah accepts she improvises from a newspaper lying open at a review of the latest release at the 'Pearl Picture Garden' in Darwin[8]: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Inhibited and self-conscious, Sarah is a bad story-teller. With a bare idea of what the film is about, gesticulating at a drama she cannot narrate, she gives Nullah only elements *for* a story from which all events are omitted: there is a wizard, a girl, a dog, a twister, a 'faraway land … called Oz!' and songs, 'lots of songs'. Pressured by Nullah to sing, she hums a few bars of 'Somewhere Over the

Rainbow', skipping most of the words before finally letting fly with a full-throated 'dreams really do come true'.

Sarah's awkward performance works magic because Nullah is a creative and generous listener. He does not know all the English words but in the ellipses between her phrases and scraps of song Nullah helps Sarah produce equivalences—wizard/magic man/*galupa*, tornado/twister/storm/the Wet, faraway land/Faraway Downs, rainbow/Rainbow Serpent, dreams/dreaming songs—translating an unseen film into an untold story that Nullah knows and loves. We could say that they collaborate to convert a set of stock figures from the transnational folklore of Hollywood into elementary signs of Aboriginality ('outback lore'), but in the fiction this conversion also runs the other way. In contrast both with Drover's confident lecturing around the homestead to Sarah about Aboriginal beliefs, and with the wonderful cinema scene in which Nullah, disguised in blackface, sits enchanted way up high in the Pearl Picture Garden while another beautiful child sings 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow' on screen, in the liminal space of the humpy reciprocity and 'intersubjectivity' (Langton 33-35) are created in the ellipses opened by stock elements: Sarah's weak story-telling deflects Nullah's grief while Nullah gives Sarah the confidence to sing.

To call the elements enabling this process 'clichés' is of course a viewer's 'act of recognition' (Amossy 34) and in the culturally indefinite space of the film's circulation it is also a specialised evaluative act. The scene itself is not about those elements even as it plays on the highly variable potential of any global blockbuster audience for familiarity with them, or with some of them. Rather, the scene is about recognition in the story-telling process and what we have to do (as listeners and viewers as well as narrators) to achieve it in conditions where cultural familiarity is unevenly distributed and evaluative responses highly variable.

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Since it is likely that more members of the global audience for *Australia* are familiar with bits of *The Wizard of Oz* than with translated and generalized fragments of Aboriginal Australian cosmology, the film's use of the latter will have a pedagogical or exotic charge for many viewers while others wince at the possibility of that wide-eyed, uncritical response—the enthusiastic response that Nullah offers Sarah's bad story and of which he is the bearer and the audience delegate throughout the film.

Ken Plummer points out that participation in any context of story-telling can lay foundations for a limited but none the real production of community; 'the consuming of a tale centres upon the different social worlds and interpretive communities who can hear the story in certain ways and hence not others and who may come to produce their own "shared memories"' (22). Taking place as it does in time, story-telling may open new paths between places and spaces by involving 'a stream of joint actions in local contexts themselves bound into wider negotiated social worlds' (24); Nullah's rapt involvement in Sarah's story is in this respect a transnational filmmaker's dream. However, Plummer's account also suggests a way of thinking about the relationship between 'clichés' and the participatory quality of so much controversy about *Australia*. While Sarah and Nullah activate their belonging in her ellipses, the figures enabling this have an elliptical function themselves. Each is a story starter ('a wizard …', 'a storm …', 'Rainbow Serpent! …') that, in the manner of the special form of ellipsis called *aposiopesis* (a trailing away of speech that leaves a proposition open for an interlocutor to finish), invites completion from the multiple platforms and local contexts across which the film is watched.

A vivid example of interactive completion is the 'Australia Baz Luhrmann Trailer Spoof' uploaded to YouTube soon after the film's release. The spoof targets a trailer from

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2008 that began with Sarah's and Nullah's story-telling scene but edited images in to create new equivalences easily recognized by an international audience. Thus in the trailer the magic man becomes 'Hugh Jackman' rather than (as in the film) King George and Nullah; the storm evolves into the air raid on Darwin; and the 'faraway land' of Oz is identified much more explicitly with Faraway Downs than it is in the film. By preserving these images but replacing the audio track, the spoof brilliantly queers the trailer's montage of becomings: Sarah is voiced as a theatrically gay man and Nullah swears at her; the wizard, the girl and the dog become a Qantas boat, a 'ranga' (redhead) and Hugh Jackman (because 'Russell Crowe was being a diva'); the storm invokes Jackman's 'balls like a bull'; and the story is a cynical one about the making of the film as a giant tourist commercial. All this is drenched in a sonic mash-up of Australiana including the Vegemite song; Makybe Diva winning the Melbourne Cup, again; 'Not Happy, Jan' (a legendary Telstra Yellow Pages commercial); a Sydney City Rail announcement; 'I Still Call Australia Home' (the Qantas song) and two infamous slogans from Australian tourism campaigns: "So where the bloody hell are you?" (voiced by model Lara Bingle) and "slip an extra shrimp on the barbie" (actor Paul Hogan).

In contrast to the trailer's exoteric pitch to the widest common denominator of global Hollywood literacy, the spoof is impossible to understand fully without intimate knowledge of the sonic clichés of contemporary Australian popular culture, the soundtrack of suburban lives. Hilariously parochial in its cultural capital jokes, the spoof polemically implodes *Australia*'s grandiose national rhetoric by mocking its outback icons as cheesy while pillorying the film for commodifying those icons to profit the tourist industry; Hogan's US-oriented 'shrimp on the barbie' TV commercial (1984), a huge success for the Australian Tourism Commission boosted two years later by the film *Crocodile Dundee*, is identified as *Australia*'s ancestral text[9]. At the level of composition, though, the spoof pays homage

delightfully on the cheap by mimicking Luhrmann's art of weaving unoriginal audio-visual and narrative elements together to craft a strikingly distinctive text. In the process it highlights a formal condition of Luhrmann's ability to provide what Tara Brabazon calls 'thinking spaces' and to inspire the audience participation he seeks as a director (Luhrmann in Keefe), namely, the power of cliché to ask an unsettling question: *do you recognize me*?

When we laugh, hoot and cat-call at the screen or wipe a tear away, our answer to this question is emphatically 'yes!' At the same time, the way is opened for refusal, negation, indifference, hesitation, disavowal, misrecognition—or glaring at a neighbour who responds another way. Marshall McLuhan once called this interrogatory capacity, 'cliché as probe' (53-61). Noting that stock figures store common knowledge that may be largely unconscious (and in nonverbal situations shape behaviours that can save our lives) [10], McLuhan saw cliché as 'an active, structuring, probing feature of our awareness' that is 'patterned' by deep environmental structures of culture but also highlights the 'tentative and uncertain' nature of all 'access to consciousness' (54-55). This emphasis on uncertainty led him to speculate that, far from eliciting a tired or lazy response, 'the staying-power of clichés, like that of old songs or nursery rhymes, derives from the involvement they demand'. Probing the time-honoured materials of a nation's historical culture using a Hollywood idiom in an era when the latter more than rivals the former in shaping involvement in popular memory, *Australia* can be seen as asking what we are or might be willing to recognize as familiar and desirable in a national story—questions of belonging shaped by but unanswerable within the text that prompts them.

Transnational glamour, national allure: industrial story-telling

Writing of the issues facing cultural institutions today, Chris Healy suggests that heritage matters 'because the desires stoking its production address an urgent problem: *how* specifically local and national historical traditions can provide sustaining resources in the face of globalised media and commodity flows' (105, my emphasis). This 'how?' is not a new problem for locally-minded filmmakers, given the long-standing industrial dominance of Hollywood[11], and it brings with it aesthetic and rhetorical dilemmas. Paul Willemen pointed out incisively in the late 1980s that the capital-intensive nature of film production, requiring as it does a large audience minimally to recoup costs, induces a 'forced as well as … elective internationalism' in film industries themselves, wedging the filmmakers textually between a multinational mode of address and the homogenizing project of any state willing to subsidize a national cinema. With the latter now a fading option in many countries under neo-liberal governance, feature filmmakers aspiring to create a revisionary cinema that transforms the canonical stories of a national past face an intensified difficulty in providing 'communally sustaining resources': whether negotiating a forced or an elective internationalism, they also work with uncertainty about 'heritage' recognition within their local or national spheres. There is no guarantee that a reworked story, iconographic tradition or sound-scape will have a correlate in the memory bank for much of the national audience.

Of course, this is not a uniquely Australian problem. When Hong Kong's beloved comic genius Stephen Chow Sing-chi made *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) with Columbia Pictures as well as mainland Chinese investment, none of my unimpressed Hong Kong students recognised this as a remake of Chor Yuen's Hong Kong classic, *The House of 72 Tenants* (1973) rather than a pure Hollywood invention[12]. For Willemen, these dilemmas implied that only a 'poor cinema' made from a minority position could be free to engage with nationally specific issues and audiences in a critical way (211-212); the work of audience-building and

resource provision would be carried out slowly in educational and film cultural institutions. Baz Luhrmann is not alone, in Australia or elsewhere, in preferring the contrary strategy of a 'transnational utopianism' (Cook 9) seeking to take Australian talent, sensibilities and, sometimes, stories straight to the largest possible popular audience by collaborating with Hollywood interests, genres and norms. One upside to this is the capacity of audiences anywhere to appropriate globally circulating stories meaningfully into their own spheres of concern; in my possession is a Chinese VCD of *Strictly Ballroom* packaged as 'The story of two people fighting [for] their artistic freedom against a repressive regime'.

However, coping with the patchy formation of national traditions as well as with the challenges of cultural export from a more or less marginal position is itself a rich tradition in the Australian arts. Stuart Cunningham's *In the Vernacular* traces the long struggle to create and sustain Australian modes of expression in cinema from the mid-twentieth century career of Charles Chauvel to the diasporic media practices of migrant communities today, and in the popular literary sphere Chauvel's contemporary Ernestine Hill devoted time and effort to this problem from the 1930s to the 1950s. Hill's 1951 masterpiece *The Territory*—the name given in *Australia* to the Darwin pub run by Ivan (Jacek Koman)—made a calculated appeal to the then emerging Australian urban popular culture of Hollywood cinema, Disney comics and pulp paperbacks by mixing epic, romantic, Western, ghost story and descriptive travel conventions to call attention to a region where towns as well as memories were always prone (in her vision) to disappear (Morris, *Identity Anecdotes* 40-79). Luhrmann himself points out that such mixing was typical of Hollywood cinema in the mid twentieth century, a fact that critics offended by *Australia*'s 'lurching' between registers have forgotten or may never have known: films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) 'used to have comedy, romance, action and

drama, in that order. Films these days have one of them while [*Australia*] has all four things'. (Luhrmann in Davis).

Today, endowing a film project with the glamour of transnational if not always 'Hollywood' credibility may be as much about luring national audiences along to watch national cinema as a way to access bigger budgets and a wider distribution[13]. Using an 'imported' film star for this purpose is an old stand-by in Australia's film industry, now enhanced by the emergence of Hollywood stars like Kidman and Jackman who are also Australian actors (*In the Vernacular* 63)[14]. The production stories about the stars' doings in our midst locally play an important role in creating the aura of an event, as they did for the making of *Australia*[15]. If classical film glamour is a 'self-enclosed, self-defined world' of artifice that is antithetical to the ordinary and the everyday (Dyer 92), media stories and now tweets about stars doing mundane things in our cities and resorts serve not only to highlight the *work* of star creation that Dyer argues we must perceive for the industrial glamour of cinema to cast its spell but also to include a wider community in the story-telling involved in that manufacture.

In spite of this work, transnational glamour does not suffice to lure Australians to any film hyped as a national event; for egalitarian people, too much glamour (especially in a compatriot) can emit an intransitive radiance inducing repulsion, or negative allure[16]. A cultural preference for everydayness is traced in *Australia* when Sarah loses her imported baggage of designer clothes during the drove, and undergoes a rite of passage with dusty bush garb and unkempt hair before her rebirth in Darwin as a local celebrity resplendent in a ball gown invoking a red chrysanthemum-printed cheongsam. In terms of aesthetic strategies, however, a pertinent comparison with Luhrmann's work would include other national

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experiments in globalising stories for cultural export: for example, a 'high-concept Chinese

blockbuster' such as Zhang Yimou's self-Orientalizing *Hero* from 2002 (Teo, 'Promise and

perhaps love' 345), or the blockbuster component of the Korean Wave, a multi-media

phenomenon that helped revive the Korean economy after the 1997 Asian financial crisis in

part by producing historically charged but exportable national dramas such as Kang Je-gyu's

Shiri (1993), a spy action film, and his *Taegeukgi* (2003) about brothers divided by the

Korean War. These 'event cinema' films are easily charged with nationalist complicities for

the reasons that Willemen outlines and yet each has occasioned sharp critical debates that

spill into their national public spheres[17].

In this kind of national filmmaking, two compositional principles converge to varying

degrees in the site of the cinematic cliché. One of these is the metonymic 'featuring' of the

land and its distinctive life-ways that Cunningham calls *locationism* in his study of the first

great Australian exponent of 'internationalising Australianness in a world market', Charles

Chauvel *(Featuring Australia* 26, 52-53). After learning how to market exotic locales as a

producer in Hollywood in the 1920s, Chauvel sought to make a 'film star' of Australia itself,

elaborating an aesthetic committed to location shooting; to an ethnographic interest in

communities and conflicts, including indigenous people to a degree unusual at the time; and

to a 'melodramatic vision of nation' (26) saluted in the rhetoric as well as the period font of

Australia's opening titles[18]. This font engages the second compositional principle that I call

archivism to complement Cunningham's concept. Where locationism emphasizes distinct

features of a country in order to differentiate a film within the Hollywood mainstream it seeks

to enter, archivism draws promiscuously on the historical materials of cinema and other

cultural reference systems (including, of course, 'locations') to broaden and diversify a film's

range of appeal. Most immediately, archivism renders the *film* past exotic to audiences in the

present, generating a fresh accessibility for that past and its stories while making room for erudite acts of recognition; with the Internet, quotation-spotting is no longer the preserve of a cinephile elite but a casual mass conversation.

Archivism's best known exponent today is probably Quentin Tarantino[19] but it also plays a generative role in, for example, the 'grand historicist self-fashioning' of exportable Chinese *wuxia* films made in the wake of *Hero* (Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 191). Often invoked in fleeting touches (aspects of a set design, a musical passage, an actor's make-up or a way of delivering lines), the film past in archivism may seem chaotic and dis-originated or expropriating for a viewpoint wedded to that 'chronological articulation' of time and history from which Jayamanne, Langton and Luhrmann would free our imagining of what a national past might be. Just as sequences from the cattle drove in *Australia* 'mimic' the painterly backdrops of 'stage-bound, 40s Hollywood Westerns' (Luhrmann in Davis), so passages of *Hero* owe as much to *Ben Hur* as to Hong Kong cinema, Chinese landscape painting, calligraphy lore, and traditions of *Chinoiserie*. Yet archivist technique is precise and realistic about the transnational components of any film culture today. 'Postmodernism' is too capacious a concept to grasp this and, far from sharing in the 'waning of affect' that Jameson finds in postmodern art (10), archivism arouses multiple intensities of feeling by eliciting from an audience our intimately personal as well as communal media memories.

There is a waywardness inherent in the way these two principles work together in the big, beautiful, industrially sharpened clichés of blockbuster cinema, a propensity for deviance which story-telling works to moderate though not to overcome. Probing for recognition, sounds and images in archivism activate the idiosyncratic, memory-layered materials of our lived historical experience as well as the ideological templates of *doxa*, and the outcome may

be volatile for locationism. Watching the richly coloured floating curtains that were a striking feature of Orientalizing design in *Hero*, I may have been the only person in my world to be reminded irresistibly of the white curtains in Russell Mulcahy's Gothic music video clip for Bonnie Tyler's 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' (1983), but sharing this perception around set off retrospective acts of recognition in friends. I was not the only person to see the Nuremberg Rallies more intensely than the Terra-Cotta Warriors in the temporal depths of *Hero*'s spectacular image of serried rows of soldiers massing below a horizon occupied by a shrine to absolute power. In their differing degrees of irrelevance to the national project of *Hero*, these may be extreme examples of what McLuhan called the 'patterning' of cliché by 'deep environmental structures of culture', but in their mundane eccentricity (we all deviate in our inner speech from any industrial script), they support his view of cliché as a mode of perception highlighting the uncertain nature of awareness (54-55).

The story-telling that surrounds a film and shapes its eventfulness—including the reviews, the debates and the on-line fan pages or parodies as well as the production stories— helps to stabilize common sense fields of reference that moderate what matters about that film for public purposes at any given time. Like all 'common sense' those fields are plural and shifting but they, too, are bound up with 'wider negotiated social worlds' and produce often temporary but real interpretive communities of strangers interacting across time. Thus aspects of *Australia* that I have linked to the work of Chauvel remind Peter Bentley in a on-line 'review essay' of the newsreels that were once an integral part of going to the pictures in this country: 'even some of the cinematography is a form of homage to the Movietone and Cinesound newsreels of the past, including the wonderfully done credits'. His memory enhances mine and gives me resources for thinking, as I recall eating White Knights and Buffalo ice blocks with my cousins during the newsreel in East Maitland fifty years ago—and

wonder why *that* flashes up instead of the films we saw, or a current nostalgia cliché such as 'Jaffas'. Seeing Sarah as an emblem of 'the last vestiges of the English influence coming into Australia', Bentley also draws to my attention the story's threshold setting in the historical moment when Australia changed its strategic orientation towards the United States at the beginning of war with Japan. He approves as preserving for 'posterity' all the stereotypical characters except the religious figures (to whom I had given no thought); carefully lists Australian precedents and sources for the film, some new to me (such as a 1976 film called *Oz*); and reflects on the 'positive reception and animated conversations' that followed a screening of *Australia* at the Bandbox Theatre in Kempsey.

By googling I found Bentley's essay on the website of a dissident congregation opposing same-sex marriage within the socially and sexually progressive Uniting Church in Australia. This is a zone of my society and of cyberspace that I do not frequent and with which I have no sympathy. Yet this essay touched me and, wrestling with doubts about 'promoting' that site, I continue to converse with it here. Bentley's story-telling is exemplary of just one way in which 'specifically local and national historical traditions' do continue to provide sustaining resources, including unexpected moments of community, in the context of globalised media flows. I am thinking less of the participation in those flows that posting an essay on-line involves than of the expressive *form* this takes as a conversational rather than a didactic sharing of knowledge and heritage concerns. Brigid Rooney has used the model of 'conversation' to discuss the relationship of Sue Brooks' *Japanese Story* (2003) to 'the familiar conventions of Australian desert cinema' (410), thereby thinking around critiques of that film as Orientalist in order to access a broader and more historically complex frame of reference. Low-key and speculative, this model also helps us to conceive of the relationship between films, the film past and wider cultural traditions as engaged in processes of change

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that are less decisive than 'transformation', 'critical revision' or 'break' (academic clichés with a referential value that is easily over-stretched) but that are also anchored in the common story-telling practices that frame our experience of cinema.

Common sense change: cliché as involvement

There is a black and white photograph of a man and a woman watching something unseen in a theatre. The man in the foreground is slouched down in his seat, lounging back and laughing, the hand of one loosely bent arm supporting his head. Past him the woman sits bolt upright, her hands clamped over her mouth and nose as though repressing a cry. In its abstraction this image could illustrate a textbook account of gendered response to melodrama: feminine emotional and bodily absorption is accompanied by masculine detachment and amused disbelief. However, the woman was me and so I know that at this moment she is watching with friends the cattle stampede in *Australia*. Taken by Sally McInerney on that night in the Leichhardt cinema, the photo captures differing kinds of involvement (to laugh at an affecting scene is not to be disengaged) and thus something that anyone who has seen a film has experienced but that is rarely externalised in an image: the *movement* induced by cinema in our bodies and, as the work of recognition matches our sense perception with past memory-images, in our minds and hearts.

Known to film theory after Deleuze as the 'sensory-motor apparatus'(Keeling 14-19), the preparation we all take to the movies in terms of the capacity to make sense of what happens there includes memory, affective openness to recognizing what we see and hear, and reliance on cliché (here a 'sensory-motor image of [a] thing' and a norm of perception;

Deleuze 20) for the matching of present sensation to past experience. As Kara Keeling puts it:

'a cliché is a type of common sense that enables motor movement to occur' (*The Witch's*

Flight 14). She extends Deleuze's account of cliché by drawing on Gramsci for a warmer

understanding of common sense as both 'a shared set of motor contrivances that affect

subjective perception' *and* 'a collective set of memory-images that includes experiences,

knowledges, traditions, and so on and that are available to memory during perception' (14);

the term *common* for Keeling relates to 'a community at large' (19; see 163 fn. 25). For both

Deleuze and Keeling, however, clichés give form to common-sense memory-images that may

occasionally *fail* in their habitual linking of mental and motor movement, enabling 'an

alternate perception' or, in Deleuze's terms, 'thought' (*The Witch's Flight* 14-15). Common

sense for Keeling is thus not a lower form of rationality but the 'condition of possibility for

the emergence of alternate knowledges that are capable of organizing social life and existence

in various ways, some of which might constitute a counterhegemonic force' (19).

In my terms, clichés materially open elliptical spaces and time of involvement in

which it is *possible* for change to occur in habitual ways of thinking and feeling, although as

Keeling notes it usually does not (15). Take an archival black and white film still of a close-

packed mob of cattle wedged between a mountain range outlined against the sky and a dusty

foreground wide enough to establish an anthropomorphic 'point of view'. Abstracted, these

could be any cows whatever but with some staring at the camera, their horns silhouetted

against mountain and sky, cinematic common sense tells us without further prompting from

sound, movement or narrative context that in all likelihood this is a 'stampede' cliché, and

that whoever occupies that 'point of view' is at risk from forward movement by those cattle.

In the still image a stampede could be ending or about to begin, but in a moving picture this

shot will occupy a more or less emphasized fractional moment within a cascade of similarly

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recognizable sense perceptions on the basis of which we clarify the situation. In *Australia* the corresponding shot in colour comes very briefly at the end of the stampede, overwhelmed by sound as the thundering of hooves and an urgent drumming guitar mingle with Aboriginal singing then fade away to a silence softly filled by the breeze and the whimpering of a child.

Common sense tells most people today that the entire cattle drove sequence in *Australia* is a Hollywood thing; origination issues aside, the collective memory bank is packed with sense data from Hollywood material, much of it relatively recent. At my time of writing there are 414 popular reviews of *Australia* on the Internet Movie Database, and the first is an approving comment from 'MattsMovieReviews, Sydney' that 'references to *The African Queen*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Big Country* are particularly notable' (5. Dec 2009). This is followed by a long, passionately written scorcher called 'Crikey! More Cheese than a Farmhouse Stilton' by 'Isabelle1955, Brit living in California' who shares Matt's Hollywood frame of reference though not his liking for Luhrmann's film: 'there's an aristocratic woman arriving in an alien hot land to take control of a ranch which was her husband's purchase (think *Out of Africa* but without Meryl Streep). There's a cattle drive across the Outback (again heavily borrowed from *Out of Africa*)'. A writer from Japan sees '*Oklahoma* without the music'[20]. In somewhat different conditions of social life, those 414 reviewers and Australians in particular might recognize, along with those intertexts, the cattle drove and the stampede scene from which my black and white still is taken: Harry Watt's 1946 film made for Ealing Studios (UK) in Australia, *The Overlanders*[21].

Heavily influenced by the Hollywood Western, Watt's interpretation of a 1942 cross-continental cattle drive to save beef exports from Japanese attack was an international film in its day[22]. Starring Chips Rafferty (1909-1971) as the head drover, it also 'included British,

Australian and Indigenous actors and showcased the remarkable horsemanship of a young Daphne Campbell' (Rooney 411). Chips Rafferty was the Hugh Jackman of the mid-twentieth century; famed for playing the 'tough, laconic Australian bushman' (Pike), he also worked in American TV series and Hollywood films including *Double Trouble* (1967) with Elvis Presley. Rafferty once was but is no longer the essential cliché of a white Australian masculine ideal; tall and rangy without ripped muscles, a gentleman at heart, he positively lacked the commodified sheen of urbanity that Jackman's Drover is able to don with just a white dinner jacket to go to the ball in *Australia*. However, the most important thing here is not the historical shift between these white male national icons, or even between the films in which they appear, fascinating as a comparison would be. Rather, I want to trace outwards from three narrative clichés internal to *Australia*'s version of that reiterated shot of an arrested stampede—the ordinary hero, the indigenous orphan and the magic man—three movements toward change in national screen culture that I sense reverberating there.

First, between *The Overlanders* and *Australia* there is a shift in the distribution of heroic capacity and knowledge to stop the stampede. In *The Overlanders* that perilous point of view facing a herd rushing for water on flat ground is alternately held by three nervous white drovers led by Dan McAlpine (Rafferty), whose perspective is dominant and who is also the narrator of the film. In *Australia* this position is held by a terrified Nullah, with the added threat of a sheer drop from a cliff at his heels—exactly the sort of cliff from which Jedda plunged with Marbuk in 1955[23]. On the big screen this shot of a trembling child with his arms out-stretched, facing death, is literally 'breath-taking' primal cinema; bodies tense, gasp, still, press back into seats en masse, hoping to have recognised correctly that this is *Perils of Pauline*, not *Jedda*. What happens here, however, is not a simple substitution of a

happy ending for Nullah in place of Jedda's sad fate, or of the reconciliatory figure of a mixed-race indigenous child for a white settler male—real though those shifts in national fantasy and desire have been between 1946 and 2008.

In both films, the drover tells his followers at the beginning of the journey that the only thing cattle fear more than a man on a horse is a man standing on his feet and staring them right between the eyes. This claim is then tested in both films and proved true to the relief of the drover as well as everyone else; these are ordinary Australians, not American superheroes, and uncertainty is a condition of their courage. In *The Overlanders*, the source of life-saving knowledge is singular and identical with the dominant white male tested, but the 'point of view' that makes the stampede images intelligible is shared by three men. In *Australia*, Nullah is alone against the herd (as a shot from behind his head makes clear) but the singularity of knowledge is dispersed. King George is in the ultimate position of oversight on a higher cliff nearby; grasping the cause and the unfolding of the stampede before anyone else, he sings to help Nullah while Drover and Sarah are sidelined by the cattle. Alone on the cliff, Nullah bravely puts two lessons into practice; he stares the cattle right between the eyes and he sings the magic song that he has learned from King George. Given the disposition of bodies around him in this sequence, Nullah is not a hybrid figure in this moment; rather he is a child situated on a precipice but supported by the convergence of two kinds of knowledge, two practices of magic, that collaborate while remaining distinct.

Marcia Langton is right; *Australia* does in many ways give us 'a new past'. This vision of the terms of courage and survival in a young indigenous life might have been conceivable for a white filmmaker in 1946, although it was not so for Watt or for Chauvel. However, I venture to assert that had it found its way into mainstream cinema at that time

(when for white common sense 'full' Aboriginal people like Jedda were doomed to disappear while some of mixed race could at best become white), this version of ordinary heroism could not *then* have been recognised as an Antipodean cliché. That it could be called so today and scorned for promoting 'one happy nation' (Greer) signals a change in communal idealism that has already taken place in response to cultural politics over the past fifty years. In my view Langton's argument is also true of the second movement toward 'something more' in national screen culture that I see emerging in the stampede sequence with the cliché of the 'orphaned' indigenous child: an emphasis on 'giving voice' (Plummer 25) to stories of white paternity in past colonial history and to the responsibilities of all men in a child's life today.

The stampede in *Australia* is deliberately started by Nullah's father, Neil Fletcher. As in any Western his primary goal is to drive the cattle over a cliff to stop them from reaching Darwin in time for a lucrative army contract. However, a cut to his smirk at Nullah's life-threatening predicament takes us to the twisted heart of a white Australian story, preparing for the shocking denouement in which Fletcher tries to shoot his own son and is speared to death by King George. With his grating old-school drawl, his verbal tics ('pride's not power') and his treacherous servant's *ressentiment*, Fletcher is a full-blown melodramatic villain and the one major character to be played for cliché 'straight' in the sense of neither 'strobing' (Jayamanne) a camp delight in the historicity of his role (as Sarah, Drover, Flynn and King Carney all do), nor performing the metonymic touches of personality that individuate Nullah, King George, Magarri, Daisy, Bandy (Lillian Crombie), Sing Song and Ivan. Cowardly, murderous, vicious and cruel, Neil Fletcher is just plain bad.

A great deal of critical discussion has focused on *Australia*'s white maternity story in the light of the experience of the Stolen Generations made national common knowledge by

the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997. Catherine Kevin, for example, argues in a strong comparison with *Jedda* that while there lies between the two films 'a monumental shift in representations of Australia's past, characterized by a flourishing of postcolonial history', a striking similarity remains between the white couples' conversations about assimilating an Aboriginal child through adoption. Following this thread, Kevin points out that *Australia* still reserves the maternal domain for Sarah after Daisy's death and fails 'to negotiate the complexities of the ways in which white women have been implicated in colonial violence' (150). Further, while offering a cathartic postcolonial story for a post-Apology audience, the film deflects wider issues of indigenous dispossession (in particular, of land) by shrinking colonial violence down to 'child removal and the sexual exploitation of women' (155). My only argument with this is that *Australia* is 'romance not documentary' (Langton, 'Why Greer Is Wrong') and that films offering catharsis and comfort are sometimes able to shift our habits of feeling and thinking precisely because of this gift.

In feminist and postcolonial circles the real and symbolic roles played by white women in colonial nation-building is now an easily 'tellable' story. This is an achievement. Not so long ago it was scarcely told at all by white women and it is still some way from forming part of a national common sense. However, if we isolate the white mother cliché from the wider social relationships sustaining Nullah between that stampede and the edge of that cliff we may ignore the major shift effected by *Australia* relative to both *Jedda* and *Night Cries*; in stark contrast to both those films, engaged father figures are not absent in *Australia* and they exert, for good and ill, diverse kinds of agency. Kevin notes that Sarah insists to an incredulous Dr Barker (Bruce Spence) at the Darwin ball that Aboriginal mothers grieve for lost children (150) but then elides the outrage that Sarah commits by saying of the Mission children that their fathers 'are right here in this room'. Clearly a condition of the history in

Bringing Them Home, the white paternity story has been relatively slow to gain in 'tellability' (Plummer 25), featuring in recent decades mainly in work by indigenous filmmakers (such as Rachel Perkins' film of Jimmy Chi's play *Bran Nue Dae*) [24]. The remarkable thing about the 'habitual formation' of white Australian bodies, including the 'mental movement ... involved in cinematic perception' (Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 19), is that when fathers are missing from a family story we don't always notice. There is no automatic recognition of a mystery to be solved. Rather it is passively registered as common sense: the father is just not there[25].

Australia is a blockbuster with paternity at the core of its concerns and this is what makes it a national event for me; as Shino Konishi points out, the film's 'real strength' is to politicize the present as well as transforming legacies from the past (26). For contextual conditions shaping an increased tellability of paternal acknowledgment stories I would situate the film, as Konishi does, between *Bringing Them Home* and another report that appeared when *Australia* was in production; *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: 'Little Children are Sacred'*. Given the controversies about responding to male violence in remote Aboriginal communities that have followed that report[26], it is significant that if Nullah ends up with an adoptive white mother he also has two sets of male figures in his life, all of them present at the stampede[27]. On the one hand, he has blood relatives from melodrama: Fletcher (plain evil) and King George (magnificently good). On the other hand, on the 'realist' plane of the film, he has around him an ambivalent and undependable surrogate father, Drover, and a genuine protector of children—Magarri. In this distribution, loving kindness, responsibility and self-knowledge are all on the side of the two Aboriginal males. So while I, too, shuffle in my seat as another white mother takes centre stage and wince as another black sidekick dies (as Magarri does) to enable white male heroics, it is Magarri's speech to Drover about his duty of

care for Nullah that persuades me viscerally that other aspects of our common sense can change.

The third movement I see extending from the scene of stopping the stampede is one hovering at the tips of Brandon Walters' fingers as he stretches out his arms toward the cattle, right shoulder back, leading with his left like a boxer but with fingers splayed out in a gesture that could refer to Aboriginal hand painting, to an indigenous dance movement or (a common non-indigenous perception) to a white 'ooga-booga' or 'blackfella magic' cliché. This is indeed the narrative moment when Nullah becomes a magic man, a becoming to which he aspired hearing from Sarah about *The Wizard of Oz* as King George sang above them. Widely disseminated on the Internet, used as a metonym of the film, and even painted on one website by an artist who says she usually posts about the vampire series, *Twilight*[28], this image could also be called a 'Nullah cliché' (there are several). However, as an Australian long resident in Hong Kong I see something more in the emphatic curling of fingers on Walters' left hand. In a sense perception activating memories that are common sense in large parts of my life but not often in those involving discussion of Australian national cinema, I see a 'kung fu' cliché.

Recognizing this gesture I sense another Australian cinema, one perhaps impossible now but faintly becoming imaginable, in which it will be common knowledge for film audiences that Yuen Wah, the actor who plays Sing Song, is one of the greatest senior performers of Hong Kong kung fu cinema; that he grew up with Jackie Chan as one of the Seven Little Fortunes performing troupe from a famous opera school; that before making *Australia* he starred as the landlord in *Kung Fu Hustle;* and that 'Sing Song' is the English name of a Chinese performance genre. In this film culture to come and in the social life by which it is organised it will be inconceivable for the story of a Chinese man and his relations

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with Aboriginal people to be left on the cutting room floor of an Australian global blockbuster set in the Northern Territory. Artists such as James Baines ('Broome Odyssey', 1989; 'Bombs Over Darwin', 1991)[29] and Tracey Moffatt ('Something More', 1989)[30] give us a visual vocabulary for this cinema; in Moffatt's famous image, for example, we already have a young Aboriginal woman (as it happens, wearing a red cheongsam)[31] dreamily gazing at something beyond her small world of white and Chinese figures around a wooden shack.

In *The Politics of Storytelling*, Michael Jackson suggests that 'though storytelling mediates our relation with worlds that extend beyond us, the important thing is not how we name those other worlds but how narrative enables us to negotiate an existential balance between ourselves and such spheres of otherness' (23). Jackson's is a work of ethnography rather than film criticism, but his emphasis on the open-ended and involving process of negotiation rather than the more decisive act of naming (since 'the vantage points from which we customarily view the world are, as William James puts it, "fringed forever by a *more"* that outstrips and outruns them') is helpful for understanding how film stories, too, achieve the shifts that they sometimes do. For Anne Freadman, we can temporally situate this 'more' not in a penumbral never-never region grasped only in philosophy but in the time of practical activities at the heart of any culture: the jokes and parodies cultures use to represent themselves as though from an exterior, and the stories that parents use to acculturate their children. Teaching, for Freadman, is story-telling in this sense, and its function is to give us a way of apprehending things that are 'not yet' part of our culture (288). Film stories, too, sometimes play this role and, far from always signifying creative failure, clichés and the work of recognition in which we negotiate with them can decide when we settle in our habitual grooves and when a touch of poetry from the future may lead us to sense that 'not yet'.

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[1] In her discussion of framing and reframing within a media temporality of indefinite circulation, Collins draws on the work of Butler. On the concept of cinema 'event', see also Morris, 'Tooth and Claw'.

[2] For a reception study in a German context where this awareness is lacking, see Haag.

[3] This essay began as a keynote address to this conference, 'Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* Reviewed' (2009). I thank the organisers Maria Nugent and Shino Konishi for inspiring us to think about the film and engage in the public debate.

[4] See Hogan 64. The *Wikipedia* entry for *Australia* reports at my time of writing that the review aggregator websites *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic* report a 55% positive reception and an average score of 53/100 respectively ('Australia 2008 film').

[5] In romance fiction set in Australia as elsewhere the aristocrat is usually male and the lower class or colonial lover is female; for example, Margaret Tanner's *Stolen Birthright* (Casper, WY: Whiskey Creek Press, 2008). A rare exception is Rosa Praed's *Lady Bridget in the Never Never Land* (1915). Brigid Rooney and Elizabeth Webby gave me these examples.

[6] For an overview of these events, see Edmunds.

[7] Thanks to Stephen Muecke for drawing this to my attention.

[8] See Nugent 3-4

[9] This commercial is abjected in popular culture because, while Hogan came to national fame as a comedian by playing an iconic white working class Australian, Australians say 'prawn', not 'shrimp'. See Morris, 1988.

[10] McLuhan (54-55) tells a wonderful story about the literary critic, I A Richards, surviving a boating accident by clinging to debris in the water while he was unconscious. A report of this carried the headline, 'Saved by a Stock Response'.

[11] A sub-set of the large literature on cultural globalization concerns the survival strategies of small national cinemas: an excellent introduction is Hjort and Duncan. Not all countries struggling to retain a film culture responsive to local and national issues are small and American filmmakers also face this problem within a Hollywood geared to global distribution

and, today, production as well. See Miller *et al.* on the international division of labour now sustaining 'global Hollywood'.

[12] This film was itself a remake of a 1963 film made in mainland China, and the story has recently surfaced again in Hong Kong cinema as *72 Tenants of Prosperity* (2010), directed by and starring Eric Tsang.

[13] An explanation of the defection of a national audience and an account of a successful response to this that differs greatly from options tried in Australia is Hjort's account of New Danish cinema (*Small Nation, Global Cinema*).

[14] Another important factor has been the development of a 'local Hollywood' studio network (Goldsmith, Ward and O'Regan) in Australia.

[15] In one of the more exploitative global media stories associated with *Australia*, Nicole Kidman was reported as claiming that bathing in outback 'fertility waters' enabled her to fall pregnant for the first time at the age of 41. ('Kidman's unexpected production pregnancy').

[16] The actor acclaimed as 'our Nic' during the 1990s and her marriage to Tom Cruise became a bad object for many Australians around the time of her appearance in Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2000): see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0203009/news?year=2006 . During the making of *Australia* there was a barrage of negative publicity about Kidman (Benjamin; and 'Nicole Kidman's Neighbours Hate Her').

[17] See Teo ('Promise and Perhaps Love') on the controversial involvement of Hong Kong filmmakers in the PRC's pan-Asian blockbuster experiments as Hong Kong becomes nationally integrated with China. On Korean wave, see Chua and Iwabuchi.

[18] Chauvel's method in making *Jedda* was reiterated by Luhrmann's research process of visiting Bathurst and Melville Islands to speak to people who had been mission children and 'going walkabout' with the family of Brandon Walters (see Davis).

[19] The Internet bristles with *Kill Bill* 'reference guides'. The top contender is part of *The Quentin Tarantino Archives* (a 'community-edited, Q.T.-approved killer knowledge base'): see http://www.tarantino.info/wiki/index.php/Kill_Bill_References_Guide

[20] These reviews can be found on http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0455824/reviews

[21] Brigid Rooney pointed this out to me (I too had forgotten the film) and *The Overlanders* is also discussed by Bentley.

[22] There is an industrial difference here. In the 1940s 'international' films involved varying kinds of co-operation between two or more nation-based companies or groups. Today, a 'transnational' film is likely to have its entire production process dispersed across many locations around the world. See Miller *at al*.

[23] There is a sheer cliff drop scene in *The Overlanders*, during which cows fall in shots similar to some in the stampede scene from *Australia*. However, in the *Overlanders* this crisis is caused by a tree blocking the mountain path, not a stampede.

[24] Stories of cross-racial relationships both illicit and (when possible) licit in the context of the pastoral frontier of course feature in memoirs and oral history, and in the mid twentieth century they were publicly told in national media by writers such as Ernestine Hill (if often in the genre of titillating gossip). For a study situated within the conceptual and political field of 'the Stolen Generations', see Probyn-Rapsey.

[25] An absent husband and father within the working conditions of pastoralism is a cliché of canonical Australian literature (notably Henry Lawson's 1892 short story, 'The Drover's Wife'). I am thinking here of situations in which such absence is passively registered or not noticed at all.

[26] While several authors cited here have participated in this controversy, Austin-Broos gives an account of the forms it has taken and the discursive as well as political conditions shaping those forms.

[27] In Konishi's fine analysis of paternity in the film as a whole there are also 'four fathers', but for her one of these is the historical trope of 'the good white father government' (a phrase she draws from Probyn 70). My discussion here is limited to the lawless scene of the stampede and emphasizes Magarri's role instead of the state representatives active in other parts of the film.

[28] http://naleme.deviantart.com/art/Nullah-215697418.

[29] http://warandgame.files.wordpress.com/2008/12/darwef.jpg

[30] http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/26/Tracey_Moffatt/75/32682

[31] Rosemary Huisman pointed out the echo between Tracey Moffatt's art work (in which the flower print on the bright red cheongsam is black) and Sarah Ashley's dark red and cream-flowered dress for the Darwin ball. The latter is in fact a Western ball gown with touches of jade blue and a full-length skirt, but the framing of the images in which it appears emphasizes the cheongsam inspiration of the bodice. That we may remember 'Something More' on

perceiving this dress in *Australia* testifies to the impact of Moffatt's art-work in public

imagination.