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MASTERS THESIS

Representing Aboriginality

A post-colonial analysis of the key trends of representing aboriginality in South African, Australian and Aotearoa/New Zealand Film and an analysis of three films in the light of these trends.

Centre for Culture, Communication & Media Studies
Supervised by Prof. Keyan Tomaselli
Co-supervised by Elaine Binedell
I, Sacha Clelland-Stokes, hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work and it has not been submitted to any university before. Where use has been made of others, it has been duly acknowledged in the text.

Signed by:

Sacha Clelland-Stokes

12 December 2002
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ABSTRACT

Premised on an understanding of films as political artefacts that both reflect and construct a society’s discourses, this dissertation undertakes to interrogate the dominant trends in the representation of aboriginal people in Australian, South African and Aotearoa/New Zealand film. JanMohamed’s thesis of The Economy of the Manichean Allegory is employed to interrogate these key trends in terms of Other/Self binaries, where representations of the Other are understood to be sensitive to tensions within the individual psyches of the mediamakers as well as to social tensions and stresses within the ‘political unconscious’ of the society in which they appear.

Working within the framework of post-colonial studies, the particular emphasis of this dissertation is on the reflection and construction of Other/Self identities in terms of the colonial relationship, and the cinematic negotiation of the neo/post-colonial tensions within Australian, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South African societies.

In conjunction with the broad exploration of the dominant trends in the representation of aboriginal people in South African, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australian film, three specific films are analysed to illustrate some of the key trends discussed. The Great Dance – a hunter’s story (Directed by Craig and Damon Foster, 2000) and The Last Wave (Directed by Peter Weir, 1977) are analysed in terms of the trends in the representation of aboriginal peoples by non-aboriginal filmmakers that they represent. Once Were Warriors (Directed by Lee Tamahori, 1994), on the other hand, is discussed as an example of a film in which aboriginal filmmakers represent aboriginality.

Following JanMohamed, “I have implicitly treated the texts as expressions of the nexus of economic, political, and social factors that define their colonial context, which, in spite of local variations, displays a fundamental structural uniformity consisting of the Manichean opposition between subject and object, self and other, white and black” (1983:263). In this way, The Great Dance, The Last Wave and Once Were Warriors have been used to illustrate the political power of cinema, where “at the core of the colonial relationship, as T.O. Ranger declares, is “the successful manipulation and control of symbols” (Ranger, 1975:166)” (McDougall, 1995:339).
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CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTING ABORIGINALITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN, AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND FILM

An Introduction

In post-colonial societies, issues of identity and authenticity are central to people and groups of people, both colonisers and colonised, who inhabit the colonised land. Representations of Other people or groups of people are informative of the ways in which the authors of these representations imagine themselves and how their identities in post-colonial societies are negotiated. The filmic representations of aboriginal people in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa, with which this dissertation is primarily concerned, are interesting more because of what they suggest about the politics, anxieties and desires of those creating the representations, than they are in and of themselves as bearers of ‘truths’ about those they represent.

If the media not only reflects but also constructs the dynamics of the society in which it operates, media representations become significant as political tools by which a society is created in accordance with the specific political motivations of the ruling or dominant group. Through the articulation of colonialist discourses in the media, the imperialist power relations of colonial and neo-colonial societies are established as normative. Post-colonial discursive practice is an important exercise in that it challenges colonial discourses that seek to maintain imbalanced power relations. The deconstruction of cinematic representations destabilises ‘normative’ attitudes and cultural identities that form a part of neo-colonialist narratives. The destabilising of imperialist grand narratives, in turn, can create possibilities for the disruption of real-life politics and social arrangements.

My analysis of the representation of aboriginality in dominant Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australian and South African film practice is a generalised one. I will be focusing on trends of representation and the political and psychological motives that generate these trends. I will then take a more specific look at three films: The Great Dance, The Last Wave and Once Were Warriors. I have selected these three films as case studies because together they clearly illustrate my arguments regarding the key trends in the representation of aboriginality in these countries. The Last Wave and The Great Dance are both reflective of some of the trends in the representation of aboriginal people by non-aboriginals as Other, whereas Once Were Warriors is a film about Maori people, directed by Maori director Lee Tamahori. Once Were Warriors reflects the possibility of ‘the empire writing back’ and is significant to the debates surrounding the representation of aboriginality by virtue of the fact that it problematises the discussion through its illustration of resistive aboriginal film practice, and its construction of an oppositional political discourse.
The term ‘post-colonial’ is itself contested. At face value it appears to refer to a social condition and discursive practice chronologically following the end of colonial rule and the acquisition of independence in former colonies, but as Williams & Christman point out in the introduction to their reader Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory, “the persistence of neo-colonialist or imperialist practices in the contemporary world is a very obvious, perhaps the most serious, obstacle to any unproblematic use of the term post-colonial” (1994:3). Furthermore, Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin assert that post-colonial theory “addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact” (1995:2). The simultaneous existence of colonialism and post-colonial resistance and currently neo-colonial practices alongside post-colonial activity, undermines any definition of a post-colonial condition based on a chronological relation to colonisation.

Instead of a chronological explanation of the term ‘post-colonial’, Stephen Slemon believes that the term is most useful “when it locates a specifically anti- or post-colonial discursive purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that the colonising power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its Others and which continues as an often occluded tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations” (1995a:12).

According to this definition, ‘post-colonial’ refers to a discourse of resistance and reaction to colonialism. Post-colonialism is ‘post’ in the sense that colonialism is a ‘pre’ requisite for a post-colonial discourse, but it is not ‘post’ in the sense that colonialism or its effects must necessarily be over before post-colonial voices can emerge.

But if a chronological definition of post-colonial practice is too narrow, Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin warn against a definition that is too broad and which denies the historical relation between colonisation and a post-colonial condition. They believe that the term is in “danger of losing its effective meaning altogether” (1995:2), as it has been used to describe a large range of phenomena, both related and unrelated to the historical fact of colonisation. This loose usage of the term ‘post-colonial’ runs the risk of disguising the foundation of the term’s meaning in the process of colonisation altogether.

Ashcroft et.al proceed to set the perimeters of their definition of ‘post-colonial’, by noting that “post-colonial’ has come to stand for both the material effects of colonisation and the huge diversity of everyday and sometimes hidden responses to it throughout the world. We use the term ‘post-colonial’ to represent the continuing process of imperial suppressions and exchanges throughout this diverse range of societies, in their
institutions and their discursive practices (1995:3). What is central then to an understanding of post-colonial theory is its focus on resistance to colonial and neo-colonial (imperialist) discourses.

It is the scope of this dissertation to employ a strategy of post-colonial deconstruction in an analysis of dominant Australian, South African and Aotearoa/New Zealand film practices and in relation to the three abovementioned films as examples of these dominant trends. My specific focus will be on the social myths that have been historically generated through film, and particularly regarding the indigenous people in these three countries, namely the Australian Aboriginal, the San and Maori peoples. The body of study on which I will draw is that of post-colonial theory, which will provide an ideological framework for my analysis.

Why is post-colonial film analysis important?

If, as is discussed above, post-colonial studies must be grounded in a firm recognition of the historical event of colonialism, and the post-colonial condition as a result of and reaction to the real-life politics of colonialism, why is film analysis important to post-colonial studies? The answer to this question lies in the important role that film plays in both reflecting and constructing the socio-political discourses of a society, where according to O'Regan, films “are a means of interrogating the public and civic culture” (1996:21).

O'Regan explains that films project the discourses within a society and the society's ‘psychic dispositions’. Furthermore, according to O'Regan, films and filmic representations not only tell a viewer something about the society (or individuals) that created the film, but a film can also have a political effect by offering new alternatives and ways of imagining the society and the cultural identities within it. Cinematic representations are then always political in that they operate from within a particular discourse or social understanding and either reaffirm or are resistant to, what Jameson calls, the “political unconscious” (Quoted in JanMohamed, 1983:263) of the society in which the images are generated.

Media representations create myths that render certain points of view as common sense, and through this process ‘myth transforms history into nature: dominant historical processes are made to appear ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’, even ‘God-given’” (Tomaselli, 1999:70). In this way, film creates ‘reality’, ‘truth’, discourse. Within any one society, however, a number of competing discourses may circulate at any one time, and in as much

1 Discourse is “the site where social forms of organisation engage with systems of signs in their production of texts, thus reproducing or changing the sets of meanings and values which make up culture” (Hodge and Kress quoted in Meucke, 1992:22).
As media is an important tool in the construction of the dominant discourse by the powers that be, it is also powerful in its ability to construct oppositional discourses by resistant mediamakers. If cinematic images are indeed vested with this immense power to alter a society’s “meanings and values which make up culture”, the filmic representations of any group of people in any society, becomes an important issue of control over the nature and value of that group of people’s identity. For this reason, the representation of aboriginal people within a post-colonial society, and control of media forums within that society, is as important to aboriginal peoples themselves in their struggles against oppressive ruling hegemonies as it is to colonial and neo-colonial mediamakers.

Post-colonial film analysis is then vital to post-colonial studies in its power to critique and destabilise the neo-colonialist and post-colonial discourses established through cinematic representations.

**Are Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa post-colonial societies?**

Before I commence with a post-colonial study of South African, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australian cinema, it is necessary to first justify my selection of these three countries as societies worthy of study under the banner of post-colonial studies. This belongingness of particularly Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand to the category of post-colonial societies is under question, as Williams & Christman raise concern regarding the perimeters of a post-colonial definition and question the legitimacy of the post-colonial status of white settler colonies.

South Africa, where the majority population was subjugated under British colonial rule and later by a minority colonial settler population, does not appear to be a particularly controversial example of a post-colonial society in that a process of colonisation clearly took place. The majority of inhabitants of the country were subjugated under the rule of a minority group of colonial settlers, and to some extent are still economically subjugated by the effects of on-going neo-colonialism. Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia (and Canada) as largely white settler societies, however, resist easy definitions as post-colonial.

Williams and Christman make the point that Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, as settler colonies, were treated very differently from the way other colonies were handled by Britain. Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand were given Dominion status and “were not subject to the kind of coercive measures which were the lot of the colonies” (1994:4). Further differentiating the settler colonies was their ethnic stratification, where European settlers came to make up the dominant population sector. Furthermore, settler colonies bore great
Williams and Christman go on to note that “their subsequent history and economic development, and current location within global capitalist relations, have been very much in a metropolitan mode, rather than a (post-)colonial one” (1994:4). Williams and Christman thus reach the conclusion that Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, as settler colonies, are not clear examples of post-colonial nations.

It is certainly valid to point out the historical differences between the type of colonisation that took place in white settler colonies and other colonised countries. It is particularly worth noting that the ‘first-world’ status of settler colonies distinguishes them from other colonies/ex-colonies, and that the comparably advanced economies and political structures of settler colonies likens them instead, to the European ‘centre’. This likeness to the European ‘centre’ and distinction from other colonies, however, does not in my opinion exclude Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Canada from the post-colonial discussion, as post-colonial concerns of shifting identities are nonetheless prevalent in these countries. In fact, according to Ashcroft and Salter, “we find in these cultures the most complex and ambivalent struggles over strategies of cultural self-determination and self-representation” (2000:292-293).

The ‘post-colonial condition’ is difficult to define and, in fact, is greatly variable, but as Brahm (1995:66) suggests, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand share the identity crisis of ‘newness’ that faces all post-colonial societies. If the post-colonial status of white settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia is problematic, however, that of white settlers in South Africa is no less complex. But, although a certain level of commonality can be identified in the anxieties and desires of colonial settlers and their descendents, the post-colonial dilemma of aboriginal people is very different.

The San people and Australian Aboriginals are indigenous to South Africa and Australia respectively. Aotearoa/New Zealand Maori are not indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand, but are descendants of Polynesian settlers who settled the land first, long before the arrival of the now dominant settler population from mainly British origins. Due to the great length of time lapsed since the Maori ancestors’ migration and the fact that they were the first inhabitants of the land, the Maori people do not appear to suffer the same identity crisis of ‘newness’ ascribed to settler people, and are now considered aboriginal to Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The post-colonial dilemma of aboriginal people may involve a sense of newness brought about by social upheavals and change, and a renegotiation of their place in changed post-colonial societies, but unlike settler peoples, aboriginal people are not insecure about their belongingness in the countries where they live. Their belonging to the category of colonised people is also not in question. In fact, Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin go so
Far as to claim that "the indigenous peoples of 'settled' colonies, or 'First-Nations', have in many ways become the cause celebre of post-colonialism. No other group seems so completely to earn the position of the colonised group, so unequivocally to demonstrate the processes of imperialism at work" (1995:214).

It is primarily the representation of aboriginal people as the colonised Other that I am concerned with in my analysis of Australian, South African and Aotearoa/New Zealand film. The post-colonial identity crises of European settlers in these countries is, however, also central to an analysis of the representation, largely by European settlers and their descendents, of aboriginal people as the Other to an imagined European/settler Same (as is reflected in The Great Dance and The Last Wave but not in the Maori made Once Were Warriors). In the light of this focus, Williams’ & Christman’s understanding that “colonial discourse analysis and post-colonial theory are … critiques of the process of production of knowledge about the Other” (1994:8), is particularly useful.

**Naming and defining aboriginal people and ‘communities’**

In this dissertation I will be dealing with issues of representing San, Maori and Australian Aboriginal people. However, to assume homogeneity within these broad racial categories is misleading and essentialist. It disguises the diversity and complexity of aboriginal groups of people and social arrangements, where one aboriginal group may be culturally very different from another and may face different issues that need to be specifically addressed rather than washed over with a broad ‘aboriginal’ paintbrush. Tomaselli makes the point that ‘rhetorical use of ‘community’ disguises class, race, cultural, geographical, political and gender relations and disputes. The term offers an immunity from these potentially disruptive – but vital – sites of domination and resistance” (1999:177).

It is therefore useful to be as specific as possible in identifying aboriginal groups and their specific concerns, but even within any given community, groupings are fluid and any one individual may consider herself belonging to a number of different categories or identity groups that cross one another. For example, a !Xo hunter may consider himself part of the !Xo community that is a San grouping distinct from other San communities, and yet consider himself a member of an identity category of San hunters that cuts across multiple San communities and excludes other members of the !Xo community, and again at different times he may consider himself belonging to a group of government workers who are not necessarily San or !Xo.
McKee further problematises easy use of the word ‘community’, by claiming that communities are identified in terms of imaginary identity boundaries that are constructed according to ideologies rather than actualities of “who is ‘we’ and who is ‘not we’” (1997:45). The alternative approach is put forward by Moynihan and Glaser, however, who unlike McKee, do not believe that community identities are entirely imagined, but rather that they have their basis in real-life differences. They “say ethnicity is ‘the character and quality of an ethnic group’, where the group-ness of the group is taken to be obvious to those who participate in it, and who know themselves to be ‘ethnic’ (Moynihan and Glazer, 1975)” (Thornton, 2000:18).

Defining cultural communities is then an enormously complex and controversial task and one that cannot be undertaken with any illusions of a possibility of accurately representing all individual members of any given community. Having said that, I believe that patterns of behaviour, representation, oppression and so on do exist amongst groups of people. Without claiming that all aspects of the whole are true of all its parts, I believe that generalised analyses can be made about aboriginal communities, and indeed that such analyses are potentially valuable to the community or grouping involved. It is largely the representation of aboriginality and not the aboriginal groups themselves, however, that is the focus of my study, and as such the specificity of my discussions of aboriginal groups is limited by the specificity of the dominant cinematic trends of representation.

The hybridisation of aboriginal people in Aotearoa/New Zealand, South Africa and Australia also results in problems in the naming of aboriginal people. The San peoples, for example, are divided in their opinions and where some groups prefer to be called Bushmen, others prefer the name San or Khoi/San. I have elected to predominantly use the term San, which is the accepted name used by WIMSA (Working Group of Indigenous Minorities In Southern Africa). With reference to Aotearoa/New Zealand and Maori people, the preferred Maori name for New Zealand is Aotearoa and white New Zealanders are called Pakeha². I have used the term Pakeha with reference to New Zealanders of European descent, but refer to New Zealand as Aotearoa/New Zealand in recognition of contemporary debates about the bi-cultural status of the country. When referring to the Pakeha dominated superstructure, however, I have named the county New Zealand, and have opted for the Maori name Aotearoa when referring to a separatist Maori space within Aotearoa/New Zealand. When referring to Australian Aboriginal peoples, I have used the term ‘Aboriginal’ with a capital ‘A’ to indicate my reference to this specific Australian racial group as opposed to aboriginal peoples generally.

² Pakeha literally means ‘foreigner’
The economy of the Manichean allegory

The category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality – that of the Self and the Other ... Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself ... Lévi-Strauss, at the end of a profound work on the various forms of primitive societies, reaches the following conclusion: ‘Passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is marked by man’s ability to view biological relations as a series of contrasts; duality, alternation, opposition and symmetry, whether under definite or vague forms, constitute not so much phenomena to be explained as fundamental and immediately given data of social reality’ ... Things become clear, on the contrary, if, following Hegel, we find in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility towards every other consciousness, the subject can be posed only in being opposed – he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object.

But the other consciousness, the other ego, sets up a reciprocal claim ... No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (de Beauvoir, 1997:17-18)

In the above explanation, de Beauvoir explains the process of self-definition in terms of establishing binary oppositions. If one can know what one is by knowing what one is not, one can define oneself by projecting what one is not onto an/Other who is the binary opposite of oneself. This identity is corroborated if the Other recognises you as ‘the One’, the essential, and claim the alterity of your identity as her/his identity. Within a colonial context, colonialists sought to construct their own elevated identities by projecting their alterity onto colonised peoples.3 JanMohamed explains this process in his seminal text, *The Economy of Manichean Allegory*:

If every desire is at base a desire to impose oneself on another and to be recognised by the Other, then the colonial situation provides an ideal context for the fulfilment of that fundamental drive. The colonialists’ military superiority ensures a complete projection of his self on the Other: exercising his assumed superiority, he destroys without any significant qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, political, legal and moral systems and imposes his own versions of these structures on the Other. By thus subjugating the native, the European settler is able to compel the Other’s recognition of him and, in the process, allow his own identity to become deeply dependent on his position as a master. This

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3 There are of course any number of Self/Other identity binaries possible. The Self’s identity can be constructed, in terms of the economy of the Manichean allegory, along the lines of a wide range of identity axes and the binary between coloniser/colonised is but one such binary. For the purposes of this dissertation as a post-colonial study, however, this particular binaries of coloniser/colonised and settler/aboriginal have been prefaced as the relevant Self/Other oppositions for consideration here.
According to JanMohamed, and following a Hegelian model as described by de Beauvoir, the colonialist seeks to represent the colonised people as both diametrically opposite to the colonialist and as essentially inferior, if not evil. JanMohamed writes that a colonialist could, in theory, respond to the Other through a process of either identity or difference, but for the colonialist to recognise the indigenous people as essentially identical, he must bracket the assumptions of his cultural perspective and judge the indigenous people in terms of their value systems. JanMohamed explains that the colonialist inevitably assumes moral superiority and, as a result, does not question his/her own values and ideologies and does not choose to get to understand those of the colonised Other, which are assumed to be inferior. Furthermore, the colonisers’ ‘will to power’ (Nietzsche, 1993) dictates that they will seek justification for their political domination of the colonised. The construction of the Other is not only the result of an existential need to define one’s Self, but is also motivated by the politics of the coloniser.

By projecting negative qualities onto the Other, the colonised Other is constructed in a variety of negative ways, and as fundamentally unfit for self-government. This fetishistic construction of the Other then justifies the subjugation of the Other under colonial rule. Furthermore, the process of denigrating the colonised Other in order to justify colonial rule serves another function within the economy of the Manichean allegory, where the colonialist Self is able to ‘increase, by contrast, the store of his own moral superiority; it allows him to accumulate ‘surplus morality,’ which is further invested in the denigration of the native, in a self-sustaining cycle’ (JanMohamed, 1995:23). The projection of the coloniser’s alterity onto the Other serves both ends and sustains the cycle of colonisation. Hence, the coloniser’s encounter with the colonised is not one of a dialectic between Self and Other, but a projection of alterity.

But if the Other is the mirror to the colonialist’s identity, by which he can know himself, the colonialist is dependent on the Other for the colonialist’s own sense of Self. This simultaneous dependency on and rejection of the Other locks both the coloniser and the colonised into a double bind. Although the coloniser imagines the colonised Other as essentially evil and is therefore repelled by the colonised, the coloniser is simultaneously dependent on the colonised Other for his elevated social and material status as well as for his sense of “moral superiority and, therefore, ultimately for his very identity. Thus, as Sartre says, the colonial system simultaneously wills the annihilation and multiplication of the natives” (JanMohamed, 1983:4). Likewise, according to JanMohamed, the colonised admires the colonialist’s technology and yet
by rejection and dependency on the part of the colonised, generates a host of secondary contradictions that engulf the colonial society” (JanMohamed, 1983:4).

JanMohamed expands on the double-bind presented by colonialism to both coloniser and colonised, where the coloniser justifies his domination of the colonised by believing in the civilising imperative of his mission. If he succeeds in this process of ‘civilisation’, however, he simultaneously destroys his own excuse for colonial privilege, by encouraging the colonised to assimilate him and therefore achieve autonomy and equality. Also, for the colonised people the option between remaining loyal to their native culture presents the consequence of accepting a servile position within a colonial reality. Assimilation, however, carries another severe consequence of disconnecting them from their own culture and history. The colonisers must then continue an on-going process of ‘civilising’ the colonised people, safe in the understanding that their own objectives to ‘civilise’ the natives will never be achieved. The coloniser reassures himself of the possibility of this on-going situation, by imagining the colonised Other as essentially, and therefore immutably, inferior. This construction of the Other is done by substituting natural or generic categories for those that are socially or ideologically determined. All the evil characteristics and habits with which the colonalist endows the native are thereby not presented as the products of social and cultural difference but as characteristics inherent in the race – in the ‘blood’ – of the native. In its extreme form, this kind of fetishization transmutes all specificity and difference into a magical essence. (JanMohamed, 1995:20)

By claiming that the colonised people’s alterity is ‘essential’, the colonialist is able to justify his subjugation and control of the Other and simultaneously rest assured that the colonial situation is biologically determined and will therefore never change. This kind of essentialist discourse acts as both a justification for the colonialist’s actions and a reassurance of the permanence of her/his colonial privilege.

But, if the status of the Other is imagined as immutable in its otherness, the nature of what this otherness is, changes. The Other is constructed by the coloniser as a foil to her/his own identity and through a process of projecting the coloniser’s fears and desires. The identity of the Other must therefore be mutable in order to accommodate the shifting fears and desires of the coloniser, which are themselves subject to changing conditions, both personal and political.

This point is important in terms of post-colonial film analysis. Through a study of colonial and neo-colonial cinematic texts it becomes obvious that there are a number of key trends in the way in which the Other is represented, and yet these trends sometimes appear, at face value, to be contradictory. Using JanMohamed’s
Other’s identity in accordance with the needs of the individual/group who control the representations of the Other, the stereotypical trends of representing aboriginal people are best understood in terms of the political and psychological needs of the author(s) of those representations, and these needs change. In fact, when the needs of the media-making Self necessitate it, the distinction between Other and Self can also be collapsed altogether.

But although representations of the Other change, they nonetheless, operate within certain confines. Goldie uses chess as an analogy for this situation, where

> the indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker, the individual player, the individual writer, can move these pawns only within certain prescribed areas. Whether the context is Canada, New Zealand or Australia becomes a minor issue since the game, the signmaking is all happening on one form of board, within one field of discourse, that of British imperialism … To extend the chessboard analogy, it would not be oversimplistic to maintain that the play between white indigene is a replica of the black and white squares, with clearly limited oppositional moves. (Goldie, 1995:232)

It is the scope of this dissertation to interrogate the key ways in which the aboriginal Other is represented within this limited framework of oppositional Self/Other moves.

**The standard commodities**

Although all representations of aboriginality do not fit neatly into clear and distinct categories, Said’s (1978:190) five ‘standard commodities’ are useful in highlighting generalised trends in the representation of the Other according to the economy of the Manichean allegory.

Sex and violence are two of the standard ways in which indigenous peoples are represented in the ‘economy’ of aboriginal media representation. These two standard commodities can be understood as two sides of the same coin, or “poles of attraction and repulsion” (Goldie, 1995:235), where most frequently the female aboriginal is represented as sexually attractive and the male aboriginal is constructed as a fearsome threat. Gilman (1985:20) understands these poles in representing aboriginals to be the projection of the coloniser’s fears and desires, where the ‘good’ maiden is a representation of the coloniser’s desires and the ‘bad’ savage man represents what the coloniser fears he/she will become. This latter exercise of representing the aboriginal Other as savage can be further understood as a projection of colonial guilt for colonising the Other and the violence of the colonial act, that is projected onto the colonised instead.
Goldie offers another interpretation of these standard commodities where the aboriginal characters act as symbols of the colonised land. Within this understanding, the savage, violent man represents the threat of the unknown and ‘untamed’ new land and the sexual maiden represents the temptation and excitement involved for the coloniser in pioneering new territory.

The third standard commodity gives way to the fourth. The third standard commodity is orality, where the non-literary culture of aboriginal peoples is represented by colonialists to imply that aboriginals occupy a different realm of consciousness altogether. This leads to the fourth standard commodity, which sees aboriginals represented as mystical.

The standard commodity of the mystical aboriginal is embodied in representations of psychic, witch-like characters. The oracular power of the mystical aboriginal can be represented as “either malevolent, in most nineteenth-century texts, or beneficent, in most contemporary ones” (Goldie, 1995:235).

Finally, the standard commodity of the prehistoric aboriginal is widely employed to represent aboriginal people as historical artefacts, where aboriginals are understood to be relics from either an earlier stage of evolutionary development, in which case the aboriginal is degraded as an animal-like creature, or as existing outside of history in a state of Eden-like Innocence. These kinds of representations of the Other, can be understood as projections of the colonisers’ anxiety at the degradation of the coloniser’s ‘reality’ and his/her own moral decay and a corresponding desire to recreate Eden. This desire results in a “tendency to see indigenous culture as true, pure, and static” (Goldie, 1995:235), where “whatever fails this test is not really a part of that culture” (Goldie, 1995:236).

The commodities – sex, violence, orality, mysticism, the prehistoric – can be seen as part of a circular economy within and without the semiotic field of the indigene … It appears that as long as this semiotic field exists, as long as the shapes of the standard commodities change but the commodities remain the same, the chess match can appear to vary but there is still a definable limit to the board. The necessities of indigenisation can compel the players to participate but they cannot liberate the pawn. (Goldie, 1995:236)

Excess and lack

Intersecting with Said’s standard commodities are other categories of representation, as labelled by other post-colonial thinkers. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim that representations of the Other are divided according to whether the colonised Self projects his/her alterity as either terror or lack. Young substitutes the term ‘terror’ with ‘excess’ and then goes on to explain how the division between the projection of alterity as
this divide does not contradict Said’s categories (as explained by Goldie), but feeds into them. According to Young’s thesis, representations of the Other will either be violent or sexual (possessing “surplus affect”), or the Other will be represented as lacking logic, history, language or consciousness, in which case the Other will be represented in terms of orality, mysticism or the prehistoric.

In accordance with Young, JanMohamed suggests that the Other is imagined as either degraded or noble savage. Quoting Mannori, JanMohamed explains that the projection of the identity of the Other as either noble or degraded savage is a result of the colonialist’s “desire to flee the object-as-subject” (1983:279). This can lead to

a serious rupture of the image of these others or to a failure in the process of synthesis whereby the image is formed. The image falls into two parts which recede farther and farther from one another instead of coalescing; on the one hand there are pictures of monsters and terrifying creatures, and on the other versions of gracious beings bereft of will and purpose – Caliban and the cannibals at one extreme, and Ariel and Friday at the other (1964:5). (JanMohamed, 1983:279)

According to Said’s system, JanMohamed’s noble or degraded savages fall into the categories of representation as either prehistoric or violent standard commodities.

Although I recognise that the categories I have mentioned are not the only categories that can be applied to representations of aboriginal peoples as the Other, they provide a useful system for analysing trends of the stereotypical representation of aboriginality in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australian and South African film.

Essentialism and the denial of history

The fact that representations of aboriginal people can be divided into a few dominant categories, suggests the extent to which aboriginals have been constructed as stereotypes in the dominant colonial imagination. Stereotyping depends on a discourse of essentialism, which, as mentioned by Said who is quoted above, disguises the historical and socio-political specificities at play in constructing the identities of the Other.

Stereotypes steal history from those these typify; they provide telegraphic formulae in the place of nuance ... They expose a compulsive drive to keep the Other in his place; to render him invisible; to embody not only his difference from the norm, but his inferiority; to characterise his “difference” as natural, lacking a history of its own ... Stereotypes stand for the elision of history’s differences – for the repression of difference – while giving us snapshot pictures of historical patterns of hegemony; they reflect the boundary-delineations to which history has given rise. (Young, 1996:112-113)
This denial of history as a determining influence in the creation of identity, renders the identity of the aboriginal Other as immutable and necessary, and disguises the role of the coloniser in constructing the identity of the Other. In this way, the constructed fetishistic identity of the Other becomes ‘common sense’ and achieves the status of ‘truth’. Through recall to an essentialist explanation of the stereotypical identities of the Other, aboriginal people are denied political credibility to change their circumstances and their identities as Other. Perhaps most effective in this project of removing the colonised Other from the realm of political action, is the standard commodity of the prehistoric aboriginal.

The standard commodity of prehistoric aboriginal

The representation of aboriginal people as prehistoric, functions within the economy of the Manichean allegory on a variety of levels. As a projection of alterity, this type of representation through its binary opposite suggests that the colonist Self is modern, civilised, rational and political. The coloniser’s desire to conceive of him/herself as highly evolved and greatly different (and superior) to the colonised results in an imagined identity of the Other as separated by time and evolution, where aboriginals are imagined more like animals than humans. This prehistoric standard commodity, according to Young, represents a lack of history and civilisation.

Beyond the personal psychological motivation for representing the Other in this way, the representation of the Other as prehistoric, is of political benefit to the colonist, as the prehistoric Other is removed from contemporary political debate and the coloniser’s rule over the Other is justified by the Other’s lack. “The ideological function of this mechanism, in addition to prolonging colonialism, is to dehistoricize and desocialize the conquered world, to present it as a metaphysical ‘fact of life’, before which those who have fashioned the colonial world are themselves reduced to the role of passive spectators in a mystery not of their making” (JanMohamed, 1995:22).

Obscuring the historical and socio-political contexts of colonial and neo-colonial narratives about the Other, assists in rendering the colonist Self blameless for the Other’s identity and condition within the narrative. If the Other can be constructed as possessing essentialist qualities that transcend political and historical circumstances, the colonist cannot be held responsible for the nature of the Other’s degraded identity, nor for the event of colonialism. In effect, the dehistoricisation in colonial and neo-colonial narratives results in the blame for the subjugation and degradation of the colonised Other being transferred to the colonised peoples themselves.
Furthermore, by exaggerating the difference between the colonial Self and the aboriginal Other, the colonialist can reassure him/herself of his/her on-going colonial privilege. “Since the colonialist wants to maintain his privileges by preserving the status quo, his representation of the world contains neither a sense of historical becoming, nor a concrete vision of a future different from the present, nor a teleology other than an infinitely postponed process of ‘civilizing’” (JanMohamed, 1995:22).

The representation of aboriginal people as prehistoric is not always an imagined lack, however, but is, according to Meucke, sometimes a projection of the coloniser’s desires. In the instance of the aboriginal Other being represented as prehistoric, this may arise from the coloniser’s anxiety or guilt and a corresponding projection of a desired state of ‘Innocence before the Fall’. Regardless of whether the motivation for this kind of representation is romantic or racist, whether the aboriginal Other is represented as noble or ignoble prehistoric savage, the net effect of this kind of representation, for the aboriginal people themselves is that they are imagined out of the realm of ‘real life’ and politics. “As Biesele (1993:210) concludes with regards to the San, ‘People can despair and quietly die while mythic media paint them as happy savages”’ (Tomaselli, 1999:103).

The standard commodity of violence

Said explains the trend of representing aboriginals as violent, as an expression of fear of the indigene. Although this explanation may be true of some colonial representations and particularly of early settler representations, it is perhaps too narrow an explanation for the range of fetishistic representations of aboriginal people in colonial and neo-colonial media. The economy of the Manichean allegory is again useful here to explain the projection of excess onto the Other and the construction of, in JanMohamed’s account, the degraded savage.

“Lattas suggests that the enabling discourse of Aboriginality in the nineteenth-century settler press was an ‘iconography of evil’ (ibid.). Such a system of images presents Aborigines as literally fatal: associated not only with death, but with viciousness, savagery and cannibalism – everything that is expelled from the white society as being too corporeal (ibid:43)” (McKee, 1997d:193). That aboriginals were imagined in terms of excess is particularly clear through the repeated representation of the Other as cannibalistic. Anthropophagi is only one of a range of fetishistic and violent qualities projected onto the imagined aboriginal Other, but it is a primary signifier of barbarity and it signifies the Other’s need to be ruled and civilised.
Pieterse notes that the representation of aboriginals as cannibalistic served missionaries in Africa by justifying their missions to bring light to ‘the dark continent’. The representation of cannibalistic aboriginals assisted “these colonial growth-industries in producing ‘counter-images’ which confronted the romanticism of the natural savage with ‘scenes of pandemonium and devil worship, with cannibalism as the main signifier’ [117]” (Young, 1997:110).

Besides justifying the coloniser’s rule over the ‘barbaric indigene’, however, the Other’s imagined anthropophagi is also a projection of the coloniser’s guilt for ‘cannibalising’ the colonised land and people through the process of colonisation. As Lemke suggests, the black eunuch may be the alter ego of the emasculated white male and the noble savage could be understood as the wish fulfilment of the corrupted colonialist, where “making the colonised into savages was meant to conceal the cannibalistic nature of European colonization itself” (Lemke quoted in Young, 1996:115).

Of course anthropophagi is only one of the popular stereotypes of the aboriginal Other, and when understood as a part of the economy of the Manichean allegory, can be read as a projection of the fears, guilt and alterity of the coloniser, which finds expression in a variety of other ways.

Pieterse’s approach places cannibal imagery alongside a range of popular stereotypes which pervade the textualised history of Europe and America: the romantic untamed “Noble Savage” and the evil, disruptive “Witchdoctor” or “sorcerer”, the (desexualised) “Black Moor” and (sexualised) “Black Venus” in European images of Africa; the (castrated) “Black Sambo” and “Uncle Tom” figures, the (sexually threatening) “Black Brute” and the cheerful (desexualised) “Mammy” of American pop culture. Such imagery, he argues, continues to play a crucial role in Western identity-formation. (Young, 1997:111)

But the standard commodity of the violent aboriginal does not only serve colonial ends by transferring all undesirable character traits to the imagined Other, but the imagined violence of the aboriginal is often used to hurt or kill the aboriginal characters in colonial and neo-colonial narratives. The coloniser’s hostility towards the Other is then also satisfied through a repeated killing of the imagined Other, upon whom the colonial Self relies for his/her self-definition but who the colonial Self simultaneously hates.

The standard commodity of sex

The sexual representation of aboriginals is a diverse activity within the colonial and neo-colonial tradition. The Other as a sexual being can be constructed as perverted (in terms of excess) or innocent and romantic (in
Following the economy of the Manichean allegory, these constructions depend on the nature of the desire, fear or political motivation of the colonial Self, and these fears and desires are unstable.

According to Goldie, the sexual aboriginal Other (and most particularly the feminine aboriginal) represents for the coloniser, the available new land. The sexuality of the imagined aboriginal woman is in this case a projection of the coloniser’s desire to conquer and settle the land.

Blythe (1994), in his study of the representation of Maori people in Aotearoa/New Zealand film, explains that the sexual representation of the aboriginal object in terms of lack, as for example, innocent and romantic maiden in narratives of union between coloniser (man) and colonised (woman), is a symbolic wish fulfilment of the coloniser’s desire for a sense of belonging. In other words, where the colonial Self feels estranged in a new land, the aboriginal people represent a sense of belonging, which the coloniser longs for. Through romantic narratives where the coloniser and colonised form romantic or sexual alliances, the Integration myth is fostered and the coloniser symbolically possesses aboriginality and hence belongingness through his union with the aboriginal Other. Due to the hostility the colonial Self feels towards the colonised Other, however, these relationships are frequently disastrous. Alternatively, by logic of the economy of the Manichean allegory, the happiness of the coloniser-colonised couple is compensated for by means of fetishistic representations of male aboriginals and the fatality of these and other aboriginal characters within the same film.

Blythe suggests that the nature of these narratives is determined by the socio-political myths/discourses of the time. According to JanMohamed they are also dependent on the psychological state of the colonial author of the representations and his/her particular desires and fears which are projected onto the aboriginal Other.

The standard commodities of orality and mysticism

Said explains that aboriginal orality is understood or represented by the colonial Self as a signifier of a completely different episteme. This may be understood in terms of lack, as a lack of logic, culture and history recorded through writing, but the mysticism of aboriginal people is as frequently represented romantically, as a quality to be desired.

The projection of a vague and generalised mysticism onto the aboriginal Other reflects the colonial Self’s faith in the centrality of his/her position, where what is different is regarded as marginal and mysterious. The mysticism of the aboriginal Other is, however, represented in terms of what is known and familiar to the colonial Self. Hence, “the dangerous difference of Aboriginality is controlled by articulating it within well-known
An explicit example of this tendency to explain the supposed spirituality of Aborigines in white terms is the use of the word ‘dreaming’ (McKee, 1997d:201).

Although particularly dominant in the representation of Australian Aboriginals, the association of aboriginals with dreams and dreaming is a typical representation of the imagined mysticism of the aboriginal Other.

But dreams in a post-Freudian society have traditionally been the place where all that cannot be acknowledged in a conscious social being are supposed to be contained – all those qualities and forces that have been otherwise named the Other. To ascribe Aborigines a place in a dream-landscape thus maintains a process of othering.

Also, when dreams are linked to fantasy, this connection moves Aborigines into a different arena: if the Aboriginal exists mystically in dreams, rather than against recognizable modern backgrounds, this somehow renders materialist critiques of historical atrocities or current depredations suffered by Aboriginal individuals irrelevant. (McKee, 1997d:202)

The standard commodity of mysticism is then useful to the colonial project not only because it highlights the divide between the rational colonial Self and the imagined mystical Other, but because aboriginal people, represented as inhabitants of a dream world, are imagined outside of a political realm, which in turn justifies the coloniser’s rule.

**Becoming the Other**

Having decided that Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa are indeed post-colonial nations, it is interesting to interrogate some of the dilemmas of identity and belonging that European settlers in settler colonies face. Since it has largely been European settlers who have created media images of the aboriginal Other within these three countries, the anxieties of European settlers are of interest in an analysis of the representations of aboriginals as the projections of the desires, anxieties and alterity of the mediamakers.

Goldie expounds on a phenomenon she calls ‘indigenisation’, which refers to the European settler’s attempts to feel at home in a colonised country by means of appropriating aboriginality from the indigenous peoples. A sense of belonging is important to colonial settlers in order to foster a sense of ownership of and entitlement to the colonised land as well as to ease the coloniser’s anxieties about his/her displaced identity. Goldie explains how European settlers have, in the past, tried to address their sense of not belonging through one of two avenues: exclusion or appropriation.
Exclusion involves a process of removing the problematic aboriginals from definitions of the country’s nationhood, by claiming that “this country really began with the arrival of the whites” (Goldie, 1995:234). South Africa offers a prime example of this practice, where all non-settlers (and non-Europeans) were awarded with inferior citizenship under an Apartheid system. Of course, this practice of exclusion is no longer popular, particularly in the light of the growing dominance of post-colonial discourses and an increased awareness of the plight of First Peoples.

This then leaves the process of appropriation, which is a practice that involves annexing aboriginality by incorporating aspects of aboriginal culture within the dominant settler culture. Goldie gives the example of the practice in Canada of naming businesses with names such as ‘Mohawk Motors’, and wearing traditional aboriginal items such as beaded moccasins. This trend has also been widely practiced in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, where, for example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand the haka has been appropriated as an opening act for their national rugby team and Maori crafts such as greenstone pendants are worn by many Pakeha settlers.

Goldie also notes that colonial settlers attempt a process of indigenisation by representing aboriginality in literary and media texts. But, indigenisation does not happen only through representing aboriginal people and adopting elements of aboriginal culture. Blythe describes narratives of romantic union between aboriginal and non-aboriginal characters as a creation or expression of an Integration myth that offers one way to alleviate the coloniser’s anxiety of not belonging. Also, McKee suggests that a quality of aboriginality is frequently represented in horror film narratives as transferable onto symbolic objects, which can be owned by colonial settlers, thereby allowing the coloniser to ‘own’ aboriginality. Narratives of bizarre mutations of colonialists into aboriginal characters reflect this same displacement anxiety and corresponding desire to imagine a sense of belonging.

This displacement and anxiety regarding belongingness is central to my narrative analysis of The Last Wave, which is a clear projection of this desire to find belongingness by becoming aboriginal. The Great Dance also projects a desire to ‘find roots’ through an exploration of the lifeways and mental states of the San subjects of this documentary film.

But indigenisation does not only serve the individual psychological needs of settlers to find a sense of belonging. In the complex task of nation building in relatively new nations such as Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia and ‘the New South Africa’, it becomes valuable to construct a nation’s history and an essence of the
and ‘aboriginality’ has been distilled into a kind of essence and appropriated into the dominant narratives of the nation as an overarching symbol of the nation. This trend is more true of Australia and South Africa where the aboriginal population makes up only a small percentage of the overall population and where Australian and South African societies are extremely multicultural. In Aotearoa/New Zealand where the Maori people make up a far larger portion of the society, the discourse of aboriginal annexation is strongly contested by the popular bi-cultural discourse that has been espoused, particularly by Maori, with increasing dominance since the 1980s, resulting in a tension between narratives of integration and separation in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Besides the psychological needs of the mediamakers to ‘become aboriginal’, the grand national political narratives of integration or separate development are thus also played out in the cinematic representations of aboriginals in Australian, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South African film.

Film analysis at the intersection of the personal and political

It is then clear that representations of aboriginal peoples result not only from the psychological projections of the mediamakers, but are affected by both personal and political influences.

Tomaselli locates the motivation for typical ways of representing aboriginal people in the dominant discourse of the ruling class and the owners of the means of production. According to him, “whatever the scientific, informational or ethnographic intentions the film-maker may have started with, these will inevitably be modified in terms of the consensual discourse of the institution, itself embedded within the ruling hegemony” (1999:161).

His political analysis of film representations would seem to deny that representations are projections of individual fears and desires, as I have claimed through recourse to the economy of the Manichean allegory. It must then be understood that the personal and political motivations for representing the Other in stereotypical ways are not two distinct drives, but are deeply connected. This is explained by JanMohamed with reference to Jameson’s thesis of a political unconscious, which recognises that individuals within a society are affected by the grand narratives of the ruling hegemony, and the desires and anxieties of the individual filmmaker are most frequently in adherence to a greater socio-political myth. To this idea that representations are affected by the political unconscious, Tomaselli adds a more conscious and deliberate form of politics, by claiming that the owners of media control and contain the range of representations allowed in accordance with their political and economic interests.
Media representations are never a result of only one person’s vision, but are manipulated and controlled by a large group of people and especially by those who fund the film/television productions and who control access to television and/or cinematic broadcast and distribution. In turn, these producers are answerable to audience desires and demands as well as to governmental organisations that monitor broadcast content and impose governmental requirements.

Media representations then respond to a complex set of social and political requirements that are motivated by psychological needs to create the Other as well as a variety of political requirements to maintain a status quo, construct a nation’s origins or sense of history, find a national essence which is appropriated from aboriginal people and so on. On top of these requirements, representations must meet market demands by pleasing audiences and showing them what they desire to see, which will, in turn, reflect the ‘political unconscious’.

The collapse of Other/Self boundaries

In the light of the growing dominance of post-colonial discourses as well as attempts by ex-colonies to construct new national identities, dominant discourses within Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa have obviously changed from the more hostile approach adopted by early colonisers towards more inclusive discourses. Whereas the process of colonisation was, to a large extent, premised on discourses of difference between the coloniser and the colonised, post-colonial discourses have disrupted many of these identity assumptions and the ‘new’ national identities of ex-colonies have frequently adopted strategies of integration, to which media representations of minority groups, including aboriginal groups, have responded accordingly.

South Africa offers a prime example of how media representations change in response to shifts in the grand narratives of the ruling hegemony. The drastic shift in South Africa’s grand narrative of acute separatism under an apartheid system, to the grand narrative of the post-1994 ‘New South Africa’ of inclusion, was marked by changes in representation in, among other media forums, television broadcasting. As an example, national broadcast television channel, SABC 1 adopted the promotional catchphrase: “Simunye: we are one”, that corroborates the now dominant national discourse of unity and inclusion in South Africa. No longer are overtly racist representations of aboriginal people (or any group of South African people) openly acceptable, and contemporary ‘politically correct’ representations frequently elide differences between people and groups of people rather than accentuating them, hence including a diversity of South African peoples within the definition of Self. Blythe (1994) names this nation-building discourse of inclusive identity definitions, the Integration Myth.
Of course, I am not suggesting that all early colonial representations were racist representations of the Other and that all contemporary representations promote inclusive narratives of similarity where the Other becomes Self. Societies do not consist of unitary discourses. Instead, any number of discourses may compete in a society at any one time and media representations are reflective of individual mediamakers’ attitudes as well as the broader discourses to which they belong. There are numerous reasons why the colonial/settler Self would represent aboriginal people as either Self or Other and frequently representations even within a single film, offer conflicting signifiers that would suggest both inclusion and exclusion, similarity and difference, where these representations reflect a tension between competing discourses of collapsing and reinstating difference.

Within my analysis of the key trends in the representation of aboriginal peoples, it is not possible to accurately pinpoint the exact complex of motivating factors behind each and every representation. I do believe, however, that a number of key personal and political factors come into play and it is the scope of this dissertation to highlight these, as the popularity of any trend in the representation of an/Other identity group is informative of the broader dominance of the discourse into which that trend feeds, within the society at large.

Within post-colonial societies, film analysis is then of particular interest, as films are key signifiers of the post-colonial tensions that are at play within a society. Negotiations of identities along the Self/Other fault line as well as definitions of nationhood belonging to either inclusive or separatist philosophies are played out in the representations of groups of people by other groups of people within the post-colonial society. My analyses of three films as well as the broader cinematic trends in representing aboriginal peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, will investigate these tensions through an interrogation of not only how aboriginal people are represented but also why they are represented in the ways described - in relation to what broader discourses and in accordance with whose interests.
REPRESENTING SAN PEOPLES IN SOUTH AFRICAN FILM

An overview of the key trends in the representation of San peoples

The San peoples and their place in the grand South African narrative

The San peoples occupy a unique position in the grand narrative of ‘the New South Africa’. Even in apartheid South Africa, the San did not occupy a position in the popular colonial imagination that other aboriginal groups in other colonised countries have. The reason for this may reside in the fact that it is not the San but rather black South Africans who have been largely constructed as the Manichean counterpart of white colonialists in colonial literature. Although the San shared the status of Other to the European settler Self, their small numbers and low political profile distinguished them from the majority black population that was subjugated under British colonial rule and later under a settler apartheid government.

The narrative of colonisation in ‘the New South Africa’ is dominantly represented as a historical event beginning with the arrival of Europeans in South Africa. The migration of black South Africans to South Africa, previously inhabited by San peoples, does not feature as prominently in the public discourse of South African colonisation. The story of colonisation is popularly imagined as the story of white oppression over black people in South Africa and the post-colonial narrative of liberation is celebrated as a largely black struggle. The history of the harsh treatment of San peoples by early black migrants to South Africa is an embarrassing reminder of the dominant black population’s historical status as colonisers as well as the formerly colonised.

Furthermore, within the new dominant discourse of the post-1994 South African nation, the belongingness of black South Africans in South Africa is not popularly questioned. The presence of San peoples as the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, however, destabilises the legitimacy of the belongingness of black people in South Africa. It is therefore useful to remove San peoples from the political space occupied by the rest of South Africans by imagining them to exist outside the sphere of contemporary society, unaffected by historical and contemporary socio-political realities.

Despite the change in government and the corresponding change in control over the media, the San have retained their position as Other in the popular imagination. They are Other to both black and white South Africans and have been relegated in the South African mass media to a remote and isolated desert land where they are imagined to be unaffected by history and political processes such as colonisation.
In contemporary South African media representations, the San are neither represented as the heroes of the struggle nor the imagined South African society of the present and future that is popularly represented in advertisements and SABC 1 ‘Simunye’ links. The San peoples fill another role in the South African socio-political theatre: that of the eternal timeless, ahistorical and mystical/mythical characters of an ancient South African past. They are the mythical and yet essential spirit of South Africa as a land, which in some way is seen to link all South Africans. The San have, in recent times, been used as a symbol of South African-ness in much the same way as the springbok and protea are used to denote South Africa as a nation. This is very evident in the use of the image borrowed from San rock art along with the phrase, ‘!ke e: /xarra //ke’ in the South African coat of arms.

In a post-colonial act of resistance against the European tradition of inscribing a Latin motto, the ‘New South African’ government looked for its own parallel version of a ‘dead’ language that would encapsulate a ‘universal’ or at least essentially South African truth. That parallel was found in the language of the /Xam with the motto ‘!ke e: /xarra //ke’ meaning ‘we are different but join together’. The question can be asked though: Whom is the ‘we’ referred to in this San proverb? Framed within a national coat of arms it is safe to assume that the ‘we’ refers to all South Africans, /Xam or otherwise, and this interpretation was legitimised in President Thabo Mbeki’s address to the nation at the unveiling of the coat of arms, 27 April 2000. He said: “I ask you … to embrace this coat of arms as your own, to own it as a common possession, representing aspirations of a winning nation” (Quoted in Mguni, 2002:102).

But by appropriating this specifically San cultural artefact to represent all South Africans, are the San privileged or disenfranchised? The parallel between the San /Xam language and Latin points to an ideology of the San and their cultural heritage and language as ‘disappearing’ or ‘dying out’. Furthermore, the use of a San language to express a general truth, a national dictum, hints at an ideology of San as a mythical and universal identity to be appropriated. The /Xam language and proverb is appropriated as belonging to all South Africans and this strips the San community of ownership and control over their own cultural artefacts. Furthermore, by using San languages and heritage as a parallel to the colonial use of Latin, the San people’s historical past and their socio-political present is obscured, effectively removing them from South African public life.

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4 ‘Simunye means ‘we are one’
5 ‘The /Xam were a cultural group of San that now no longer exist’
Most films on Africa are homages to the primitive, to the past, to the exotic, suggesting the inarticulacy of their subjects (Georgaka, 1978, p.19). Early anthropology was strongly influenced by then prevailing biological evolutionary theory, and its practitioners sought to classify and compare societies, much as scientists were doing in studies of plant and animal species (Harper, 1990, p.35). Even as late as 1992, one empathetic commentator who established a fund to ‘save’ the Bushmen, called for contributions on the basis that “the Bushmen, the oldest, still surviving members of man’s family tree were well worth saving – no less than the California condor, the spotted owl, or the snail darter” (Save the Kalahari San Pamphlet, 1992). (Tomaselli, 1999:98)

Following this understanding of the San as an ancient species, representing the earliest surviving link in the human ‘family tree’, the earliest representations of San people by European colonialists were the photographs taken under the supervision of Heinrich Immanuel Bleek (1827-1875) between 1870 and 1875 in Cape Town.

Bleek was influenced by the work of Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel and Thomas Huxley, and was interested in investigating the origins of the human species. Informed by biological evolutionary theory as well as the political and personal drive to identify the Other as essentially inferior, Bleek sought evidence “that there existed a biogenetic reason why the British male was superior to other (subject) peoples” (Webster, 2000:4). Huxley “suggested that by understanding and measuring every aspect of the physical exterior of the body (particularly in the variety of subject peoples of the Empire) something of the inner man and his history might be revealed” (Webster, 2000:4). Following this logic, Bleek embarked on a study of the physical characteristics of the inhabitants of Cape Town. This study involved taking photographs of the ‘Bushmen’ who are positioned in the pictures in profile and unclothed, as objects of study. Webster notes that “the photographs, although presented with the verisimilitude of the studio portrait, are in fact closer akin to zoological studies” (2000:5).

Bleek’s representations reflect both a projection of alterity as well as desire (for a return to Innocence), as the Bushmen “were placed and recorded to conform to preconceptions of Eden-like simplicity, savagery etc” (Webster, 2000:12). It is perhaps unsurprising then that the conclusion that Bleek reached from his observations of the physical and linguistic dissimilarities of the Bushmen from both white and black South Africans, was that “their linguistic/visual difference suggested that they were biologically ‘underdeveloped’ and therefore a bridge race on the ordered linearity of the biogenetic Haeckel model” (Webster, 2000:5).

The rise of evolutionary and racist theories denigrated alien non-white peoples as inferior or less civilised, who had not yet evolved from a simpler, primal state. Perrott’s (1992) evolutionary discourse refers to this as ‘the 10,000 year generation gap’ vis-à-vis ‘us’ and the San. He claims to have found the last ‘wild’ Bushmen clan and that DNA fingerprinting techniques ‘announced these Kung as the oldest surviving humans’ (Perrott, 1992:1). (Tomaselli, 1999:98)
This evolutionary model of representing the San peoples is typical of early representations and continues up until the present. But not all representations of San, in terms of an evolutionary model, reflect the same tone.

The representation of San peoples as prehistoric can be roughly divided into two categories: racist and romanticised representations of the San’s imagined primitivity. On the one hand, the San subjects are constructed as the binary Other to the colonial Self and as the recipient of the colonialist’s alterity, whilst on the other hand, the romantic representation of the San people as happy savages can be understood as a projection of the colonialist’s own angst and his/her desire to return to a state of Innocence before the Fall.

Tomaselli describes van der Post’s early representations of the San in terms of a search for origins, where for van der Post “the ‘First People’ provided a vehicle for this recuperation of Southern Africa’s original culture and its social harmony” (Tomaselli, 1992:212). Van der Post’s filmic and written representations of the San as First People, depicted the San existing in a romantic state of Eden before the Fall, which is “a powerful – if essentialist and mythological – representation” (Tomaselli, 2001:1).

But where van der Post romanticised the ‘prehistoric San’, other representations of the San as prehistoric cast the San not as noble savages but as degraded savages. “The silent versions of early films on the San put it thus: ‘No God, No Morality, No History’ (Van Zyl, 1980:32) … So crude were many of these films that they did not portray the San in ‘man vs. nature’ terms, but as civilisation vs. savagery, progress vs. backwardness, and so on. Where later films offer poetic revelation, the former are hard, sharp and ruthless ideological imposition” (Tomaselli, 1999:200).

The strength of this evolutionary discourse (whether racist or romanticised) is clear in its duration through time, where even contemporary representations of San peoples insist on their exclusion from the ‘normal’ sphere of socio-political contemporary society. As an example, the diorama exhibition at the South African Natural History Museum in Cape Town that has recently been closed amidst controversial debate, was “a powerful, theatrical exhibit persuasive in its narrative of a people with no history, no time, no politics” (Skotnes, 2001:38).  

Skotnes frames this example within the context of an on-going trend in representing the San, claiming that it feeds into a greater discourse surrounding the San that has been employed in a wide range of media representations. For Skotnes, “it is a narrative that has not only enabled genocide and dehumanisation, but

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6 The Diorama Exhibition represented the --Khomeni Sun
the San, the disqualification of descendants as the rightful inheritors of San culture and San creative traditions and the use of San figures, ironically in a national crest” (Skotnes, 2001:38).

Consistent with the evolutionary model, the San were sometimes represented, in early films, not only as savage and without history or morality, but as animal, barely human at all. Tomaselli cites the Denver Africa Expedition (1926) as a striking example of a film that reflected and reinforced dominant stereotypical conceptions of Africa, of the time. This film, made by the Universities of Denver and Cape Town and the South African Museum, represents an exploration of various African peoples from across the continent. It shows the San as the most degraded of all Other communities. This film “is a telling manifestation of the patronising Western gaze at the ‘dark continent’, seen to be partially populated by Bushmen people who, its producers claimed, sometimes looked and behaved like animals” (Tomaselli, 1999:6).

These representations of San peoples as animal or under-evolved can be understood as a projection of the European coloniser’s alterity or his/her desire for a sense of origins and a time of greater innocence. Besides being a projection of alterity or desire though, representations are influenced by political and practical conditions and the popular representation of San peoples as prehistoric can also be explained in terms of ethnographic filmmakers’ desires to find ‘wild’ and unaffected groups of people and cultures that could be discovered through great expeditions and explorations. The Marshall expeditions, for example, “were part-and-parcel of those discourses which invented ‘Bushmen’ as a category to certify the quest for a people representative of a previous stage of human authenticity evolutionarily located in a pre-pastoral stage of development” (Tomaselli & Homiak, 1999a:161).

As Tomaselli and Shepperson point out, it is not only the psychology of the individual filmmaker that determines the representation of the San in a certain preconceived way. These stereotypical representations must also meet the market demands of film distributors and television networks that broadcast to largely Western television audiences. Furthermore, Tomaselli and Shepperson note that the pro-filmic event is sometimes itself affected by the presence of filmmakers and the impact of the filmmakers’ preconceived ideas. Subject communities have been known to respond to the expectations of them and “to take on new personas, invent lost tribal traditions, and even make up grunting languages to satisfy the a priori needs of filmmakers, journalists, and tourists” (1997:282).

Returning to the Marshall expeditions as an example: in the quest to meet the requirements of the television networks and to validate their own exploratory expeditions, the Marshalls constructed a version of the truth in...
agreement with the evolutionary anthropological discourse of the time that would be palatable to television networks and audiences. As a result, their early films, and especially The Hunters, are guilty of a practice called, ‘unidentified anthropological restoration’. Tomaselli notes that “in making The Hunters, Marshall (1993) has admitted that he could not find any ‘wild Bushmen’ (Gordon, 1990). So without acknowledging it in the film itself, he reconstructed the ethnographic present in terms of the dominant theoretical Western image of a ‘stone-age’ people-caught-in-time” (1999:199).

But it is not only the construction of imaginary events that is involved in anthropological restoration. Marshall himself explains that anthropological restoration can be done through a process of both commission and omission, where commission involves the staging of events in accordance with preconceived notions of what the pro-filmic event should be, regardless of whether or not the preconceived ideas have any relation to actual conditions. Omission, on the other hand, “occurs when contextual information is excluded: a couple may be actually hunting and gathering, but left out is information that the man works for the army and that the family draws rations from the quartermaster [Marshall 1993:10]” (Tomaselli & Homiak, 1999a:170).

Both practices of commission and omission collude in the construction of narratives that reaffirm the filmmakers’ own fantasies rather than represent the realities of the subject community. Marshall admits to the artifice of his cinematic constructions of !Kung San people in his early work, noting “how his early film making was a projection of his own fantasies and how his later work aimed to reduce these personal projections onto others” (Shepperson and Tomaselli, 1997:283).

What is clear through this account of The Hunters and Marshall’s own confessions, is that “films and television programs are not essays on authenticity and inauthenticity so much as allegories of cultural engagement” (Blythe, 1994:10). In this light, and as I have argued in the previous chapter, more can be understood from a film, about the filmmakers and the paradigm in which they operate, than about the film’s subjects themselves.

The political usefulness of removing aboriginal people from a contemporary socio-political sphere, for example, is evident in the absence of socio-political comment in many films that represent the San as prehistoric.

Wilet et al. charge that The Hunters is a denial of history, as does Gordon (1990a, p.31) of Sandface. Neither film referred to the social linkages between the San and their hostile white and black neighbours who chased them into the Kalahari over many hundreds of years. But, then, neither did many of the social anthropologists who originally studied them (eg. Lee and DeVore 1968; Thomas 1959; Silberbauer 1981). The dominant anthropological paradigm until the late 1970s was that the San were remnants of the stone age living in a state of ‘pristine primitiveness’. (Tomaselli, 1992:206)
The denial of history that takes place by constructing the San as prehistoric, relieves the coloniser Self (be he/she white or black South Africans) of his/her responsibility for the largely socially depressed situation in which San peoples live in contemporary South Africa. This is further achieved by representing the San as happy savages, where media representations of the San encourage audiences to believe that the San choose to live in their impoverished, ‘premodern’ conditions, despite exposure to modern alternatives. “Because of this, few researchers or film makers have ever asked the San themselves what they think about the films in which they have acted, or which they have seen” (Tomasselli, 2001:8).

The enormous success of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), as an international blockbuster, has made it perhaps the most powerful construction of the San people as prehistoric and happy, living in a state of Innocence before the Fall. The five *Gods* films, “(as do many others) portrayed the ‘Bushmen’ in terms of the romantic anthropological stereotype (or discourse) created from 1950s anthropological fieldwork of the Peabody Museum and Harvard University expeditions” (Tomasselli, 1999:43).

With regards to the *Gods* films and other narrative genre films, however, it is important to recognise that the representations of the San characters operate according to specific genre conventions and must be read accordingly.

Dominant Western criticism of the *Gods* films accuses director Jamie Uys of racism in his constructions of comic, pre-modern San characters. Gao responds to these criticisms with surprise and amusement that Western audiences are unable to distinguish between the genre of documentaries and that of narrative films. He understands the *Gods* films as en(act)ments of previous San lifeways and he comments that he finds it “amusing that people still believe this and that they come looking for those Bushmen” (Gao quoted in Tomasselli, 2001:5). And yet, the popular understanding held by the Western/colonial Self is indeed that such representations of San people as are constructed in the *Gods* films are ‘truly’ representative of real-life contemporary San people.

That films both reflect dominant discourses and simultaneously reinforce them is clear in this elision of audience’s understanding of fantasy and reality in reaction to the *Gods* films, where “audiences of hundreds of millions … now tourists, visit Southern Africa … [and] expect to find Khoi/San people who live like they are shown in these films” (Tomasselli, 2001:4).
Said explains the trend of representing aboriginal people as mystical as the colonial Self’s assumption that aboriginal people employ whole different epistemes from the Western or colonial Self. Undoubtedly, different communities have different ways of making sense of ‘reality’ and often the more historically isolated and less globalised communities of aboriginal peoples have epistemes that are not dictated by Western scientific and materialist understandings. For example, “the sacred (magic) and profane (social life) are not discrete categories amongst all societies. Hunting, a profane activity, requires sacred activity. A similar respectful communion of economic and spiritual interdependence between animals and hunters is evident in The Hunters and The Africans, fictionalised in a most poignant way in Greystoke, The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes (1984)” (Tomaselli, 1999:192).

But trends of representing aboriginals as mystical do not involve explorations of other complex systems of knowledge, but are dominantly representations of Western conceptions of witchcraft or generalised dream-like states, Innocence before the Fall or simplistic animal instinctive behaviour. Whether romantically or fetishistically represented, the mysticism of aboriginal people is frequently imagined as an extension of the imagined status of aboriginals as prehistoric. This trend of representing aboriginal people as mystical can then also be understood as a projected desire to return to a state of Innocence before the Fall.

Within the uncertainty and shifting ‘realities’ of the Western Self’s postmodern condition, the desire to discover some essential, stable ‘truths’ and a less materially bound and perhaps more simple way of life, can manifest itself by looking ‘backwards’ into the past to ‘find one’s self’. But, the simultaneous desire to maintain the Manichean divide between Self and Other by representing the Other as mystical, together with the Self’s desire to possess elements of this imagined mysticism, locks the Self into a double bind.

The desire to return to a state of Innocence, to ‘find one’s self’ and one’s ‘roots’ is projected onto the represented Other. The aboriginal is then represented as ‘belonging’, as ‘in touch’ with essential truths, and as owning a deeper connection to the land. However, in terms of the Manichean opposition between Self and Other, if the Other possesses these qualities of belonging and innocence, the Self is necessarily further estranged from his/herself and from his/her roots, history and so on. It then becomes necessary for the Self to either bridge the gap between Self and Other or to ‘own aboriginality’ through the appropriation of symbols of aboriginality which are imagined to carry with them the ‘essence’ of aboriginality, or to discover ‘aboriginal truths’ without ever collapsing the divide between the Self and the Other.
allowing the Self access to ‘aboriginality’ without ever actually collapsing the divide between Self and Other. Tomaselli finds this reconciliation in van der Post’s construction of the ‘Bushman’, where his “Jungian analysis stressed the ‘collective unconscious’: the ‘Bushman’ as ‘our dreaming selves’ (Barnard 1989, p.110)” (Tomaselli, 1992:212).

van der Post does not credit the ‘Bushman’ with different and complex epistemes to which the colonial Self does not have easy access. Instead, by employing an evolutionary model of understanding the San peoples, van der Post suggests that the San’s episteme is simply an earlier version of the Self’s from which the Self has evolved. The ‘collective unconscious’ of the Self would then allow the Self an unconscious understanding or memory (through her ancestors) of the San’s episteme.

The assumption that the colonial Self can enter into the mind of the aboriginal subject and learn his/her ‘truths’, in much the same way that the Self can visit a museum and learn something of the past, relies on the evolutionary theory of the aboriginal subject as a ‘frozen-in-time’ prehistoric person. Consistent with understandings of aboriginal people in terms of an evolutionary gap, the colonial Self assumes that the ‘aboriginal episteme’ is instinctive rather than intellectual. It is assumed that the Self, having evolved from the earlier aboriginal stage, has moved beyond the aboriginal episteme in much the same way that the Self assumes that the instinctive drives of animals are easily understandable (if partially forgotten or out-of-practice) to the Self’s more evolved psyche.

Alby Mangel’s commentary in Adventure Bound sums up the debilitating Western commonsense: “They do not seem to carry the pressure of the past as we do in the West”. Trapped in time as the Bushmen are, all “we” (the West) can do is “dance” (with them) as the encounter straddles the “then” and “now”. What is ironic in Mangel’s commentary is that it unwittingly intercepts a root metaphor for Ju/hoansi symbolic action. The ritual of dancing offers a way of accessing “boiling energy” to effect spiritual contact, healing, and to address dislocations in the harmony of quotidian life. (Tomaselli, 1999:197)

Mangel positions the Bushmen as Other to the rational Western Self, and hence imagines the Bushmen’s difference in terms of non-rationality and animalistic instinct, failing to credit the Bushmen with the same “serious cultural and spiritual dimensions” (Tomaselli, 1999:197) possessed by the Western Self. Mangel imagines the Ju/hoansi as simplistic and “trapped in time”. Although the Self can understand San mentality, this discourse of the frozen-in-time prehistoric San, does not allow for the reciprocal possibility for the San to have access or ‘memory’ of the Self’s episteme, as within an evolutionary discourse of prehistoric San, the Self is more evolved. Within this understanding, the Self can become the Other but the Other cannot become the Self and hence the Self can ‘own aboriginality’ without closing the divide between Self and Other.
If films are indeed “allegories of cultural engagement” (Blythe, 1994:10), it is perhaps unsurprising that in the self-consciously politically correct atmosphere of post-apartheid South African society, the myths about San people, constructed through cinema, have responded to the change in the contemporary dominant discourse. Representations of San peoples as animal-like are now contested in the media and alternative myths have arisen to reconstruct the identity of San peoples as Other. As Tomaselli notes, “myths ... change in response to shifting conditions. This is particularly evident in the portrayal of the ‘Bushmen’ by white filmmakers. From uncivilised baboon-like creatures in early films, they are now romanticised and shown to be pawns caught up in the destructive web that calls itself ‘civilisation’” (1999:67).

It is of interest to note that by romanticising San peoples, the divide between the Self and the Other is not bridged but reinvented in a new guise. Whereas the aboriginal Other was previously imagined in terms of barbaric alterity, the fashionable self-flagellation of the colonial Self within a guilty post-apartheid context is reflected in this new trend of representing the prehistoric San as ‘victim’. The Manichean binary of this construction assumes that the colonial Self is then the victimiser. Within the economy of the Manichean allegory, the sympathetic representation of the Other generates a store of surplus morality for the colonial Self that can, in turn, ease the Self’s guilt for colonial oppression and restore a balance in morality that will justify the colonial Self’s actions.

Within a real life socio-political context, pressure from television networks, producers, distributors and governmental agencies is brought to bear on contemporary filmmakers not to generate racist representations. The patronising construction of the Other as helpless victim is a more slippery customer than representations of animal-like savages and so, despite maintaining the binary division between Self and Other, these kinds of representations are sustained and generated in contemporary South African media. This is not to say that denigrating images of prehistoric ‘happy savages’ are not still popular, but these images are contested by oppositional discourses and trends of representation. The trend of representing San peoples as ‘unhappy savages’ is one such oppositional discourse.

This trend of representing the San as victims or as ‘unhappy savages’, however, still relies on the basic idea of the San peoples as essentially prehistoric or unsuited to modernisation, and, although less obvious, there is still a subtext of San peoples as animal-like in many representations that fall into the category of representing the San peoples as victims of modernity. As a clear example, the ‘Save the Kalahari San’ pamphlet (1992) that
Central to the idea of San as a victim of modern civilisation are the ideas that San peoples are necessarily separate and different from other South African people who are able to adapt to changing circumstances and that the San are helpless and therefore need to be saved. Within this discourse, it makes sense that conservation extends to protect not only plants and animals but aboriginal people too. This logic can be seen at work in the SWAA proposal for a Bushman nature reserve, in which the San “would be encouraged to live as Neolithic relics to prevent the ‘biological crime’ of their extinction” (Reitz quoted in Tomaselli, 1999:187). This proposal was backed by Edward S. Ross of the California Academy of Sciences, who believes that the San would “provide a rare and vanishing opportunity to study people in the primordial social stage which our ancestors passed through ages ago” ... Ross sees the return to ‘nature’, hunting and foraging, as conferring some kind of eco-human rehabilitation” (Tomaselli, 1999:187).

In terms of Said’s standard commodities, this collapse of the distinction between aboriginal humans and their environment amounts to a mystification of aboriginal people where aboriginals are assumed to have a deeper connection with ‘nature’ and ‘the land’ than the non-aboriginal and particularly the Western/colonial Self has. The project of conservation is then a rescuing mission to ensure that the ‘natural habitat’ of aboriginal people is not destroyed and also that the ‘natural aboriginal’ is not destroyed through contact with modernity.

This line of thinking underscores the notion that a symbolic relationship exists between people and their environment, and to destroy the one means to destroy the other. The problem arises when the idea is opportunistically used to promote sectarian political ends and reinforce the notion of tribalism in other contexts. Gordon (1984) charged that this plan would ‘conserve (the Bushmen) to extinction’. (Tomaselli, 1992:215-216).

This discourse of conservation is based on the assumption that a ‘happy savage’ is one that lives in a blissful state of prehistoric ignorance (Innocence before the Fall) and an ‘unhappy savage’ is one whose Eden is taken away. It is never questioned within this discourse, that perhaps the aboriginal people want change and that their perceived unhappiness is a result of the impoverished socio-political conditions in which many of them live as a direct result of colonisation and hundreds of years of oppression by both black and white migrants to South Africa.

Tomaselli, through his numerous fieldtrips to meet San peoples, has reached an oppositional understanding of the reality of San peoples’ engagements with modernity. He reports that
San languages, cultures and identities, like all other societies, exhibit social practices that adapt, change and develop continuously through time, space and place. This process contradicts the many films and TV programmes which depict the San as a ‘vanishing species’, as a culturally isolated desert people, frozen-in-time, who are supposedly losing some very precious (pre-industrial) innocence in their encounter with the modern world. (Tomaselli, 2001:1)

The Great Dance, which will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter, is an example of a film that constructs the San in this way, as a ‘vanishing species’, who are today the victims of modernity.

It is useful to note that the romanticisation of the San peoples as victims is different from the harsh representations of San peoples as barbaric and animalistic, as discussed above. Both trends of representation construct aboriginal people as virtually indistinguishable from animals, but whereas the romanticisation of the San as victims of modernity suggests lack, the hostility of the representations in Denver Africa Expedition, for example, suggests excess.

**Authenticity**

The title of ‘First People’ awarded to San peoples colludes in constructing a discourse of authenticity. Although it is intended to carry with it recognition of the special status of aboriginal people and a contingent political claim for special rights such as land claims, the title of ‘First People’ has often been used to reinforce the popular stereotype of the prehistoric San. “This chronological location is usually and narrowly understood in terms of a particular space (the desert) and time (timeless actually) and rarely in terms of cultural and linguistic continuities through time” (Tomaselli, 1997:835). The danger of constructing the San in this way, which was expressed by Gordon, is further highlighted by Brydon. He writes that discourses of authenticity condemn aboriginal peoples “to a continued marginality and an eventual death. Whose interests are served by this retreat into preserving an untainted authenticity? Not the native groups seeking land rights and political power. Ironically, such tactics encourage native people to isolate themselves from contemporary life and full citizenship” (Brydon, 1995:140-141).

Minh-Ha’s acerbic criticism of the project of conserving cultures agrees with Brydon’s suggestion that the conservation of aboriginal people is an act of political oppression. She, however, suggests a far more Machiavellian agenda behind this conservation drive than is implied by the concerned call for funds in the Save the Kalahari San Pamphlet. Minh-Ha believes that “with a kind of perverted logic, they work toward your erasure while urging you to keep your way of life and ethnic values within the borders of your homelands. This is called the policy of ‘separate development’ in apartheid language” (1995:265). By renaming the project of cultural conservation with apartheid terminology, Minh-Ha is clear in her comment that well-meaning or not,
essentialist representations of aboriginal people (and other marginal groups) that do not allow for change in accordance with changing conditions are an act of political oppression.

But if proposing separate development in the guise of establishing San conservation parks denies San people a political voice, the demand for San ‘authenticity’ serves this function in yet another way. By imposing a narrow definition of what it is to be San, ‘authenticity’ denies hybridity and suggests that some San people, those who adhere to stereotypical notions of ‘prehistoric San’, are more San than others who do not. This has serious political implications for San people, where the evolution of San communities and individuals is constrained by popular and often narrow understandings of what it is to be San. O’Regan notes that cultures in transition cannot easily meet the expectations of an authentic aboriginal identity. Within this discourse of authenticity, the legitimacy of the San identity of individuals or groups of San peoples who do not conform to preconceived notions of what San people are, comes into question. “The popularisation of anthropological conceptions can thus inhibit Aboriginal political demands for the special rights of indigenous peoples by making these rights contingent on particular kinds of customary cultural values and practices” (O’Regan, 1993:182). ‘Authenticity’ then not only has the effect of stripping, for example, urban San peoples of their cultural identity, but of their political rights as ‘First People’.

In response to this confining demand for authenticity, South African San peoples have responded in a number of ways. The emergence of cultural tourism villages is one such response, where San people, such as Northern Cape based Dawid Kruiper, have used the colonial Self’s desire to see the San as prehistoric for their own economic empowerment, by enacting these fantasies for paying customers. The ‘secret San’ of KwaZulu/Natal and the Eastern Cape, however, have responded altogether differently, by disguising their San identities in their efforts to integrate themselves into general South African society.

Our postmodern age, in which mobile people adopt the cultures of where they find themselves, is in conflict with the chimerical pursuit for a static authenticity. The former assumes constant change, as is evident daily amongst the secret San. For them, the constant shifting of identities, names and ethnicities constitutes a survival strategy within larger populations which are ill-disposed towards them. They have preserved their ‘Bushmanness’ in a different way to the Kruipers who display and exchange it for tourists, cameras and photographers. Both are survival strategies; both represent responses to conditions beyond their control. Both are therefore empowering resources in negotiating survival and power. The quest for ‘authenticity’, however, is ultimately sterile and essentialistic. While essentialism can be empowering in the short term, it can also be misused for nationalist sectarian purposes. Such users are anti-democratic, as they work on the basis of exclusion of minorities and people considered ‘different’. (Tomaselli, 2001:12)

Dawid Kruiper is the cultural leader of the Kalahari Khomani San
As Tomaselli and Shepperson point out, despite the short term economic benefits of ‘playing along’ with these stereotypes, accepting the status of Other to the colonial or Western Self carries other dangers. The San “are often manipulated by discursive forces beyond their control, and often comprehension, to exhibit tourist-oriented behaviour, and to feed now largely academically discredited but popularly legitimate anthropological paradigms of a stone-age people frozen-in-time” (Tomaselli, 1999:190). The reinforcement of these stereotypes of ‘authentic’ San corroborates dominant discourses of the Other that remove aboriginal people from the political sphere. In effect, the re-enactment of ‘authentic’ cultural identities “as a product of hegemony and a remarkable counterpart of universal standardization, … constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression” (Minh-Ha, 1995a:268). It is in this way that the San justify Spivak’s (1995) accusation of having cooperated in their own oppression, by reinforcing essentialist definitions of themselves that are useful to the ruling hegemony and ultimately disadvantageous to themselves.

However, to claim that all representations of San peoples have shown the San in terms of the standard commodities that position them as Other, would be misleading. In fact, “Tsamkxao =Oma’s now well-known categorisation of films about the San into two kinds – those that show the Ju/hoansi ‘as people like other people’ and those that ‘show us wearing skins as if we were animals’ [Marshall 1993:3] clearly remains pertinent even as we head towards the millennium” (Tomaselli & Homiak, 1999a:179). There are, undeniably, a number of examples of films that seek to avoid popular stereotypes of the San as prehistoric, mythical and so on, and attempt to discover the ‘truth’ about San people.

Of course when we speak of ‘truth’ we enter dangerous territory. Marshall, in addressing this problem of representing a ‘truthful’ account of San people, comments that “filming reality is a tautology. Everything a camera sees is real … The problem is whose reality we are seeing and who are we when we are looking through a camera?” (Quoted in Tomaselli & Homiak, 1999a:160). True to Jameson’s thesis of a political unconscious that pervades all our ways of seeing ‘reality’, McKee makes the point that ‘claims about the ‘realism’ of films are never innocent. They always carry assumptions, certain ways of understanding the world. They are, in the widest sense, political claims” (McKee, 1999a:155).

But if some films represent wholly manufactured fantasies of the present for comic purposes, such as in the Gods films, or to meet preconceived notions of reality, such as in The Hunters, some films are made with the intention of representing ‘reality’ as the filmmaker, or in some cases as the subject community itself, sees it. As McKee notes, “all films are representations: none, in fact, show the ‘reality’ of a given situation. But certain
genres are commonly understood to be closer to ‘reality’ than others: documentaries, for example, social problem films, gritty drama – rather than melodramas, women’s films, comedies or science fiction” (1999:145).

From 1946 on, Rouch, as an ethnographic filmmaker, developed methods of representing subject communities in ways that would be closer to ‘reality’, developing ‘participatory’ filmmaking practices. “He emerged as a cinematic bard or griot who provocatively used his camera to record, and later, to ‘recite’ back to them, the stories of the Songhay and Dogon societies within which he worked. Film-making for him was always more than just a means to an end” (Tomaselli, 1996:4).

In South Africa, this more critical approach to filmmaking as ‘visual anthropology’ “only got onto the academic agenda after 1980 in a rather fragmented way, as state-produced films about people had been used to justify apartheid since the early 1960s” (Tomaselli, 1996:7).

That representations change in response to changing discourses is evident in the Marshalls’ films, where representations of the !Kung San people can be seen to range in their proximity to ‘reality’ from the Marshalls’ early unidentified anthropological restorations in The Hunters that constructed romantically represented ‘happy savages’ to their later films including N!ai: Story of a !Kung Woman (1980), The !Kung San: Resettlement (1988) and Pull Ourselves Up or Die Out (1985). These later films adopted a method closer to that espoused by Rouch, represented the depressed social conditions of the !Kung as the Marshalls saw it and indeed how the !Kung subjects themselves saw it. “These films offer extremely uncomfortable scenes of San social disintegration, drunkenness, and cultural alienation” (Shepperson and Tomaselli, 1997:283). By representing the ‘reality’ of the subject community as accurately as possible, the Marshalls represented socio-political conditions and problems that the !Kung people faced, using methods more appropriate to critical visual anthropology.

In contrast to the depoliticisation of San peoples through their representation as prehistoric and static, films made in the ethos of visual anthropology foreground ‘real’ conditions of ‘real’ contemporary people in distinct places. In terms of Tsamkxao =Oma’s categorisations, these films show San peoples as ‘people like other people’ as opposed to the romantic or racist reconstructions of San peoples in terms of the standard commodities. Incorporating the subject community’s own viewpoints amounts to crossing the divide between Self and Other where the subject community claims authority and a degree of ownership over the representations of themselves. A more recent film that approaches the representation of San peoples in this way is In All God’s Places, which contextualises the socio-political place of the San in relation to other cultural groups in Southern Africa and in terms of their history. Furthermore, “instead of simply parading another list of
Tomaselli goes on to express the importance of San peoples representing themselves, because

If the San are not part of the global audience and discussion (of films and debates about them), then they cannot contribute easily to debates arising from such depictions. Effectively, they are disempowered. If their different perspectives are rejected as some form of 'internalised oppression', then debate cannot occur, since a conclusion already has been reached. If we reject San projects to salvage their values, identity and memory as mere 'spectacle' – as essentialist as this might appear – then democracy cannot survive. (Tomaselli, 2001:11-12)

Interactive filmmaking

Narrative cinema must meet audience demands to be ‘entertaining’ according to a set of cinematic dictates specific to the medium, genre and distribution of the film. Unlike narrative films, however, documentary and more specifically ethnographic and visual anthropology films that seek to present to the audience the ‘reality’ of a subject community, carry a greater responsibility towards the subject community itself. As McKee has pointed out, the latter film genres are assumed to be ‘closer to reality’ than narrative films and audiences read them as informative of the ‘real’ state of affairs for the subject community. It therefore becomes important that the subject community is satisfied that their needs are met through their representation in these films, as documentary films (including ethnographic and visual anthropology films) have real political significance for the people they represent.

In the light of this significance for subject communities, ethical guidelines have been drawn up for filmmakers who choose to represent subject communities within these genres. Crawford puts forward one model of ‘best practice’, which he calls the experiential mode and which involves the following pointers:

- Strong emphasis is given to the visual images that are considered the bearer's of the film’s meaning …
- A very limited use of narration or commentary and other ‘digital’ and ‘authoritative’ devices.
- No or very little use of non-synchronous and unauthentic sound …
- Long takes and no jump cuts …
- The use of the camera for ‘primary’ editing, which gives a low ratio of footage to final film.
- When explanation is needed, culturally neutral techniques are employed, such as brief captions, or what MacDougall has called ‘interior commentary’, where the protagonist or another person in the film or of the filmed culture is used as narrator.
- Subtitling of indigenous dialogue …
- The use of the wide-angle lens and avoidance of close-ups.
What Crawford is attempting to do by suggesting this model of filmmaking is to remove, as far as possible, the filmmaker’s subjective influence on the representation of the Other. This is in accordance with Bronislaw Malinowski’s (1922) well-known claim that “the final goal of which the ethnographer should never lose sight … is … to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world” (Quoted in Tomaselli, 1999:10).

But even if Crawford’s model of filmmaking is employed and the filmmaker avoids commenting or interfering with the pro-filmic event as far as possible, the filmmakers very presence in the subject community influences the pro-filmic event. Furthermore, by including some material and excluding other material, the filmmaker inevitably influences the meaning of the film. And yet, ‘seeing is believing’ and audiences are led to accept the ‘reality’ of what they see on screen without acknowledging the role that filmmakers play by selecting some images and editing out others. “By implication, analysis and contextualisation are denied validity” (Tomaselli, 1999:68). Tomaselli then suggests that in order to acknowledge that the film does not represent ‘truth’ but rather one discourse about the subject community, the presence of the filmmaker should be recognised in the film itself in order to reveal that these films are “media constructions which encode particular views – those of their makers, funders and target audiences” (Tomaselli, 1999:52).

Tomaselli cites *Classified People* (1988) and *I am Clifford Abrahams, This is Grahamstown* (1984) as examples of films in which the ideological positions of their filmmakers are partially acknowledged within the films themselves. Very often, however, documentary films are not recognised as ideological constructions but are constructed as ‘objective’ representations of ‘reality’ and Tomaselli notes that in some cases documentary directors “while paradoxically claiming objectivity, even pre-plan their shots and consciously direct the
Crawford responds to the practice of pre-planning shots by suggesting that the material should be discovered and explored in the process of filming and engaging with the subject community rather than be pre-planned. His suggestion that narration should be limited or should be narrated by the subjects of the documentary themselves, responds to the frequently adopted technique of an external voice-over that comments on the subject community and makes sense of the cinematic material for the audience from the filmmaker’s position and in accordance with her ideology. Misleadingly, “all that this Voice (of God, Knowledge, Sense, Reason) appears to be doing is to name that which is already there” (Tomaselli, 1999:68), and it is precisely in this quality of ‘realism’, that the power of film as an opinion-shaping tool lies.

The representation of the Other within the genres of documentary, which suggest to the audience that they present ‘reality’, is a minefield of misrepresentation and manipulation. If the filmmaker is to achieve, to the best of her ability, Bronislaw Malinowski’s proposed goal to “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world”, she must simultaneously avoid interference as far as possible, as is suggested by Crawford, whilst acknowledging that her role as filmmaker inevitably influences the meaning of the film she produces.

By revealing his role, the filmmaker enhances the value of his material as evidence. By entering actively into the world of his subjects, he can provoke a greater flow of information about them. By giving them access to the film, he makes possible the corrections, additions and illuminations that only their response to the material can elicit. Through such an exchange a film can begin to reflect the ways in which its subjects perceive the world. (MacDougall quoted in Tomaselli, 1999:208)

San representations of themselves

“The Khoi/San’s power to negotiate meaningful relationships in a global political economy partly lies in their capacity, where possible, to manage the making, exploitation and exchange of images and interpretations” (Tomaselli, 2001:8). Although the inclusion of San peoples in the making of films that represent them undoubtedly goes a long way towards ensuring that the images of San peoples in the media are constructive to the real-life people they represent, the most liberating films about aboriginal people are surely those made by the subject communities themselves.

“If cinema has contributed to the demise of the Bushmen, then new strategies should have been developed to counter this. Instead of making ever more mass-distributed movies about their plight, one response could have
facilitated the techniques developed by anthropologists more attuned to the politics of survival" (Tomasielli, 1992:216). No other way of representing the San peoples can as effectively bridge the gap between the Self and Other than the appropriation of methods of filmmaking by the San peoples themselves so that they can represent themselves not as the Other at all, but as Self. By doing this, non-aboriginal audiences are positioned to identify with the San peoples from the San people’s own perspectives or at least to acknowledge that they (as Western/non-aboriginal audiences) are themselves the Other to the San Self. This process of San people making films about themselves is empowering firstly in terms of redefining themselves as Self and therefore essential and central. Secondly, it is an act of reclaiming their identity and culture as theirs and positioning themselves as authorities about their culture and lifeways, a position that has too often been assumed by Western commentators.

Furthermore, where images have economic value and can be traded within a global media arena, owning the cinematic images that represent them offers economic leverage. That San peoples themselves wish for greater control over their representation in the media is evident in Toma’s comments: “I want tourists and filmmakers who come here to Bushmanland for filming to learn teach us how to film … We also want to learn us to do things for ourselves. This is what I call development [Interview with Toma, 12 July, 1996]” (Quoted in Tomasielli, 1999:192).

It would be self-defeating to claim that only San peoples can represent San peoples, as this discourse is one of separatism and ‘authenticity’ that would further serve to isolate San peoples and remove them from contemporary society and socio-political discussion. The visibility of the San in the media can help to raise issues that are central to San communities and where San peoples are represented as ‘people like other people’, this visibility can offer greater political power. It is, however, necessary for San peoples to claim greater control over their representations, whether that be done through filming themselves or through negotiated and collaborative film projects.

**A Critique of The Great Dance - a Hunter’s Story**

I have discussed some of the key trends of representing San peoples in terms of the larger myths they generate about San peoples and the effects these trends have on the subject people and communities. I have also highlighted some of the ways in which documentary films can be structured to represent something ‘closer to reality’ by avoiding manipulative cinematic techniques, and pointed out that collaboration with San subject communities empowers the subject communities and goes a long way to avoid representing San peoples as Other in accordance with dominant Western or colonial myths about aboriginal people. In the light
The Great Dance (2000) directed by Craig and Damon Foster, because it is a recent film, made by white South Africans, for a largely Western/colonial audience and is interesting in terms of the ways in which it reflects the dominant contemporary attitudes towards San people. My analysis of the representation of the !Xo as Other in The Great Dance, will involve a study of the content of the film, the production process, distribution and marketing of the film and the cinematic techniques that are employed to both reflect and construct discourses about the !Xo people and San more generally.

Construction of the San as victims of modernity

The Great Dance is a romantic documentary about the ‘hunt by running’, which is a technique of hunting that takes enormous skill and tenacity, but which is rarely practiced by contemporary San people. The central focus of the film is a celebratory reconstruction of this past hunting tradition. As such, the film takes on a nostalgic atmosphere and is critical of new laws and circumstances which impede the !Xo subject community’s hunting and lifestyles, where modern conditions and restraints are imagined to threaten the cultural existence of the San.

The Fosters’ representation of the !Xo San people calls on an essentialist rationale that claims that the San people have an innate need to hunt and that this is the ‘essence’ of who they are and what it means to be San, which is an understanding that is corroborated by a large number of San respondents themselves. Whether this is the filmmakers’ projection or the San community’s own understanding of their identity, it serves to support the political discourse of the film which suggests that San people have a right to hunt without constraints imposed on them by a modernised society or government. These constraints are represented as a crime against the !Xo community whose culture and traditions are ‘disappearing’ as a result of contemporary legislation and land demarcation.

The first words we hear spoken in The Great Dance are spoken by an unseen narrator who speaks in the first person, claiming to be the voice of !Nqate, one of the San hunters. The voice over says:

A story is like the wind – it comes floating from a far off place. We are San bushmen, the sons and daughters of the First People.

I, !Nqate live in the Kalahari. I know all the pans and waterholes around here, all the places where the animals come... I am a hunter. I hunt with my friends Xhoase, the bow hunter, and Karoha, the runner who will even risk death in the most difficult of all hunts, the hunt by running.
we were always near animals. Now we must walk far to find them.

The deterministic discourse employed in the words “this is what we are born to do”, suggests that any interference with this activity is an offence to nature. It is also suggested that the San’s hunting traditions have been interfered with, and by using the term ‘First People’ the voice over reminds the audience that this community is entitled to special rights as the first inhabitants of the land. This speech not only sets the scene for the film and introduces us to the central characters who will carry out the hunt, but also makes a political statement that feeds into the contemporary dominant trend of representing the San peoples as ‘victims of modernity’.

The overall myth that this kind of narration constructs is that the subject people long for a time past when their isolated and pre-modern existence was not threatened by contemporary government regulations that, for example, demand that the San people hunt in adherence to their hunting permits that regulate the extent of their hunting. The Great Dance reinforces the myth that San people are essentially hunters and gatherers, that they have a ‘natural habitat’ and that their interactions with modernity largely impoverish them and therefore they should be protected from the influences of modern society and the laws of the greater South African society. This trend in representing aboriginal people can be understood, as is discussed above, in terms of the filmmakers’ projected desire for a return to Innocence before the Fall. The collaborative film practices that were employed in the making of The Great Dance, however, render claims of this nature more complex, as the Fosters engaged in a long period of research in the making of the film. This collaboration involved the use of some of the members of the subject community’s own words and opinions in constructing the film’s voice over, which corroborate this discourse of the !Xo as victims of modernity.

But if the San are represented as victims of modernity, they are not constructed as primitive in The Great Dance, as was the previously dominant tradition. The !Xo San community in the film is aware of the larger South African society and its rules and the consequences of disobeying those rules. The subject community has also appropriated elements of modernised society, such as a radio/tape deck and Westernised clothing and it is noted that the children of the !Xo community go to school and speak English and Setswana. The San peoples are, however, nonetheless distinguished from ‘other people’ by the essentialist qualities that they are assumed to possess.

The Great Dance negotiates the essentialism of the !Xo’s identities as hunter-gatherers in relation to their interaction with modernity by using the discourse of ‘disappearing cultures’. Proud elements of the !Xo community’s past, specifically the tradition of the hunt by running, are reconstructed and simultaneously, the
The impending 'extinction' of this culture and its practices is bemoaned. The Great Dance does not offer a representation of a San community as remote and unaffected by contemporary life, but rather a representation of a community that is affected by the socio-political conditions of modernity and the greater South African society, and that is impoverished by this interaction. And yet, the film does not offer a discourse of political resistance or an empowering narrative of potential political action on the part of the San community to influence the condition of their lives. The San hunters have conversations about their downsized rights to hunt and to access the land and animals that used to be theirs and the voice over comments about this situation, but the San community are positioned as victims without any recourse to change their lot.

The !Xo people are aware that "our ways are being changed". !Nqate says, "sometimes we feel we have no future". This statement, while highlighting the effect of the current political-economic situation on the lives of a community, also seems to suggest that the San have no agency of their own, no ability to make choices, regarding not only political issues but also their own lifestyle and cultural practices. (Dodd, 2002:229)

The film’s press pack addresses the depoliticisation of the film’s narrative by asserting that, “as the social and historical problems that have led to their present circumstances are hugely complex (and very political), we try not to dwell on these” (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000). Instead of foregrounding the political nature of the !Xo’s interactions with modernity, The Great Dance is centrally focused on reconstructing a glorious past by re-enacting the extraordinary, but now only very rarely practiced, hunt by running.

Of course this reconstruction is, in itself, political in that it convinces Western audiences of the value of ‘preserving’ this rare cultural practice and it also reclaims a proud history for contemporary San people, where the San hunter is constructed as “a skilled and dedicated expert in the intricate arts of tracking and hunting” (Dodd, 2002:226-227). As a result, the film has been well received by San peoples themselves, some of whom have claimed that it restores a sense of pride in their past and their cultural traditions. And, according to Duffett, “that is what The Great Dance is all about. It is resulting in the San bushmen beginning to feel proud of their heritage … This is a film that does make a difference” (Duffett, 2001). Through rewriting San history, contemporary San people may renegotiate their identities as San people in more positive ways.

But, that the hunt by running is not a dominant contemporary practice is not acknowledged in The Great Dance. The film does not present itself as a historical reconstruction, but allows audiences to assume that the chasing hunt is a contemporary cultural practice that is essential for the survival of this community and which is now under threat. Contrary to this understanding of San ‘reality’, Tomaselli writes that his “experience of accompanying San hunters in the central Kalahari is that their tracking and track identification skills remain sharp, but that they use dogs, which smell out and corner the animal, where it is speared by the hunter who
The dominant representations of hunting in *The Great Dance*, however, show the !Xo hunters running for hours after their prey, without dogs or donkeys. Although new practices of hunting with dogs are briefly referred to in the film, the commentary that accompanies the visuals does not suggest that the method of hunting with dogs is predominant and that the hunt by running is seldom practiced anymore. The voice over is also disparaging of the new ways of hunting and suggests that they only hunt with dogs now because they can no longer use the land as freely as they did before:

> New ways are not always better ways. When you hunt with dogs, you do not use your own ideas; you use the dog’s nose. You make a noise and you do not see the tracks, and it is a way to bring meat and otherwise there is little work to be had. We can no longer follow the rains. We are no longer moving from place to place. Much of our land has been taken for cattle farming and wildlife parks. Sometimes we feel we have no future. My friend, !Xu says if you only sit, you are just waiting to die. That is why he is always on the move…

Suggested in this narration is that the !Xo hunters would prefer to hunt by running, despite the fact that it is more difficult and more dangerous. However, this attitude seems to be contradicted by the actual practices of San hunters as observed by researchers such as Tomaselli. In fact, according to director, Craig Foster, ninety-five percent of San people no longer hunt at all (Interview, 16 November 2002, Cape Town).

The line where anthropological restoration begins and ends is blurred in relation to *The Great Dance*. To some extent, an omission of relevant information takes place, where reference to dominant contemporary hunting practices is not omitted altogether in the film, but its prevalence as the dominant way of hunting is not made clear. Furthermore, although it is noted by the voice over that the women in the community make necklaces of Ostrich eggs to sell for money, that the men sometimes work on government projects and that the children go to school, this acknowledgment is also brief and does not frame these practices as very relevant or important realities of the !Xo community. Instead, the practice of hunting by running is awarded much screen time and narrative exploration, hence framing the hunt by running as the community’s central activity that is the most vital activity for both sustenance and for maintaining cultural values. By focusing on the chasing hunt as the central activity of the !Xo community and disguising the fact that the chasing hunt is rarely practiced anymore, the Fosters are, to an extent, guilty also of commission and the same kind of unidentified anthropological restoration as Marshall was in the 1950s.
Ironically, Being San (2001), a short film by Michael Duffett that explores reactions of San communities to The Great Dance and which was made to endorse The Great Dance by documenting San approval of the film, illustrates the constructedness of the essentialist way of life represented in The Great Dance. Being San represents San audiences who were found located just outside Cape Town, where they were learning to operate their own small businesses, as well as in a number of San settlements such as Smidtsdrift, “a dumping ground for the San. Most of the 4500 San, relocated there from Namibia, have languished in this tent city for 10 years” (Duffett, 2001). According to Duffett, these are the “conditions under which San bushmen live in South Africa” (2001), where “the teenagers wear baseball caps and trainers, want education and computers” (Graydon, 2001). This San ‘reality’ is a far cry from the lifeways of the !Xo community represented in The Great Dance.

The transivity of !Xo culture in The Great Dance is disguised by hiding or underplaying their new ways of doing things and the changes that have taken place in the !Xo community. This, in turn, lends support to the idea that ‘traditional’ or past ways of doing things are the ‘natural’ ways. “The Great Dance seems to propose that for the Bushmen, the way backwards is the way forward” (Dodd, 2002:235). It is clear then that this film constructs San peoples as victims of modernity, where their past, as symbolised by the now fading tradition of the chasing hunt, is represented as illustrious, whereas the altered socio-political conditions under which they now live are represented almost as a ‘biological crime’. This is in agreement with the logic of the Save the Kalahari San pamphlet.

The dire state of the !Xo’s victimhood, as a result of the interference of modernity, is represented in The Great Dance through moving narration and accompanying visuals of wastage and disappointment. In one such scene the voice over tells us: “Hunting is much more difficult than in past times. Fences cut the land like blades. The herds can’t travel their old paths to find food. We see our animals go to waste and we are sad and we are angry. The only ones who are happy are the flies and the vultures”.

The cinematic sequence that accompanies this voice over is a moving one that represents the interference of modernity, in the form of land division that restricts the San’s hunting, as harsh and unnatural. A leopard stalks along the side of the fence, growling and a buck runs alongside the fence, ramming its shoulder into it, unable to break through. Then the camera finds a dead springbok, riddled with maggots and the camera cranes up with a dramatic swirling aerial shot of the dead animal on the red sand. By claiming that the animals are also disadvantaged by this new arrangement of dividing the land with fences, the commentator calls on animal conservationists and audiences, sympathetic to the well-being of these animals, to side with the film’s narrative of resistance to the system that has stripped the !Xo of the land to which they used to have access. Also, by
Nqate and representing the San community, claims ownership of the animals, which suggest the San’s rights to hunt the animals as they please.

The next sequence shows the hunters finding a rotting carcass and chasing the vultures away so that they can steal the rotting meat. The voice over tells us that the meat is stinking but that the San people, who are accustomed to eating rotten flesh, do not get sick from it. The emotional response that this elicits from a Western audience, which would predominantly find eating raw rotting meat unthinkable, is one of revulsion and pity for the hunters who are forced to feed off this. This pity for both the animals and the San hunters helps to construct them, for a Western audience, as victims of modernity.

The voice over goes on to tell the audience of the !Xo’s dispossession: “But today we are told we don’t own our land, we don’t own our animals. The women are away all day looking for food. There are no good things left nearby so they must go far. When there’s good rain, nearly all our food comes from what they bring back”.

The !Xo used to be nomadic people who would move across the land, following the rain. Where there is water, there is a healthier plant life that supplies roots and berries. The animals also go where there is water and so the hunting is better. The voice over tells of the ‘old times’ “when we would hunt many animals. The rain was there, the people were happy and we would be dancing and we would dance the whole night long. But now they cry for the kudu: ‘Donka! Donka!’”

But now that the !Xo are not allowed to move freely across land divides, food is more scarce, which presents the !Xo people with challenges of hunger and malnutrition, as is discussed in the film by the hunters as they sit around the fire. The subtitles read:

Hunting is important to us. It is what we do.
If we can’t hunt, what will our children eat?
If I visit you, it’s my job to look for tracks on the way.
If I see something – sorry about the visit, I have children to feed.

This conversation reveals not only the practical need to hunt in order to obtain meat for the community, however, but also an existential need to hunt. This is echoed again and again throughout the film, reinforcing the film’s essentialist discourse that appears to be shared by the subject community itself. The voice over, which is supposedly the voice of !Nqate says: “Today we must be off hunting. That is what we do. That is who we are”.

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The film’s press pack reinforces this same essentialist discourse and the dual function that hunting serves for the !Xo community:

Tracking, Hunting and Survival are inextricably linked but hunting is also an important cultural and social fact. There is a need to eat meat; there is also a need just to hunt. Hunger and malnutrition are very real problems, but hunting in itself is a pleasurable, exciting, challenging and fulfilling experience and it is socially/culturally important for men to engage in this activity. Men behave as men when they hunt. Women, of course, also play an important and integral role in tracking and observing signs whilst they go about their other tasks; all members of the community help to build the knowledge base.

(The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000)

This essentialist understanding of San identity does not appear to be the construct of the filmmakers alone, however, but is also shared by broader San audiences, as is reflected in the comments of one respondent, Peza Dela, who after watching the film is recorded as saying: “‘The San is born to be a hunter and yet I have no right to hunt,’ … ‘If I do not hunt then I am no longer a San, it is in our blood. I must hunt. If you take away this right, you are trying to kill me slowly’” (Graydon, 2001).

Although the essentialism of claiming that hunting is vital to the cultural ‘survival’ of San people is espoused in The Great Dance (presumably representing the opinions of at least !Nqate himself), the hunters in the film do not appear to endorse ‘preserving’ their cultural heritage as a historical artefact. The voice over states: “We Bushmen must use our culture. Our children who are coming must see it and use it” and what is evident from this comment is that the !Xo acknowledge that if they want their cultural traditions to survive, they must be used in contemporary life and not only ‘preserved’ in museums, films and cultural tourism villages.

The final image of the film is of a glowing ember being thrown out into the darkness. Earlier in the film the voice over has told us: “People say we have no leaders, but what leads us on is a glowing ember, the ember we take from the place we lived last to light the fire at the place to which we go”. The ember being thrown out into the darkness can then be read as posing the question: ‘Where to next? What is the future of these people?’ As the ember, symbol of the !Xo future, burns out, the final subtitle of the film appears on screen: “Since these scenes were filmed, the !Xo people’s individual hunting licences have been revoked. Their hope is to regain rights to ancestral land, where their forefathers hunted and gathered for over 30,000 years”. This offers a gloomy hint that the future will not be good for the !Xo community unless ‘something is done’.

This final comment clearly places the !Xo community in the narrative position of victim of modernity and factors beyond their control. “No space is created for a people whose very survival could be seen as inherent in their ability to adapt to their environment” (Dodd, 2002:236). By calling the disputed land ‘ancestral land’ and pointing out that their ancestors inhabited this land for 30 000 years, the audience is reminded of the San’s
unique position in South Africa as First People, but as victims of modernity all they can do is ‘hope’ for their rights to the land to be restored.

‘Authentic’ San cultural identity constructions in The Great Dance

To define hunting as the central and essential !Xo quality, suggests the discourse of ‘authenticity’ which, as I discussed earlier, serves to privilege some community members as more authentic, more !Xo than others. In this case, women and children are marginalised, excluded from what is constructed as the central and defining activity of the community and culture (where hunting means ‘men behaving as men’), and in this way are devalued as less ‘authentic’ !Xo people. Of course the full title of this film is The Great Dance – a hunter’s story which in some way brackets the assumptions made in this film as those of a single individual who may represent a select few (hunters and more specifically hunters who ‘hunt by running’). The film does, however, presume to construct overarching narratives of the !Xo community as a whole. This is done through discussions of their cultural heritage, the use of rock paintings which are popular signifiers of San-ness, and the construction of a grand ‘man against nature’ narrative. With the exception of a brief mention of the women’s contribution and role in the community, the !Xo culture is represented as being centered around hunting and the traditions that are passed on from father to son. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sequence that, in support of his claims to entitlement to preserve ‘his’ culture, tells of !Nqate’s ancestral heritage:

My father…was a great hunter. He taught me to find my way by the trees, to remember the shapes they make. He taught me which were the good things. He taught me: you can’t eat this one, you can eat this one. The wind has long washed my father’s footprints from the sand. He taught me the signs that bring rain … He would teach me the animal tracks. Together we would follow the fresh signs … Even now, if I’m hunting, I’m doing what my father was doing, I’m singing his song, I’m dancing his dance. (Voice over)

What is evident in this section is that the women’s activities are not considered a relevant part of the !Xo ancestral heritage. The narrator, as !Nqate’s voice, claims that he learnt to both hunt and gather from his father. The film’s visuals show the adult male hunters hunting together and the women and children gathering, and yet his mother’s influence on him is not acknowledged at all. This narrative of !Xo heritage is entirely patriarchal. This is interesting in that the film, despite its title, by calling on hunting as the essential and defining characteristic of the !Xo cultural heritage, creates the impression that it speaks for the entire community, that it is not only a hunter’s story but the story of ‘the !Xo’ people, and indeed the story of all San people. Only once in the film is it acknowledged that there exists a diversity of San communities, when the
There are many Bushman tribes. The ones from the West – in the spirit they change into lions with only their skins left dancing. Here we don’t do that. We dance for healing.

On the one hand, the discourse of essentialism and ‘authenticity’ is potentially alienating to some San individuals or to certain marginalised San groups of people, and it is not always productive in negotiating new and politically empowering positions for all aboriginal people in contemporary society. On the other hand, it can provide a community with a ‘sense of self’, unity and solidarity and a cultural pride that is valuable for people who have been historically oppressed and dispossessed.

Discourses of authenticity that position aboriginal people as happily existing in pre-modern conditions are ‘politically incorrect’. Yet, the filmmakers of The Great Dance cannot be accused of representing the !Xo people in this way, as the Other, as a result of their projected fears and desires, if the community itself holds these beliefs and essentialist definitions of themselves. The responses from San audience members, as are recorded above, suggest that the Fosters’ representations of the San community as victims of modernity coincide with at least some San people’s understandings of themselves and their contemporary condition.

These kinds of essentialistic/ empathetic/spiritual/identity-driven responses are not necessarily what Western critics and academics want to hear from Khoi/San viewers and actors. The West associates hunting with ‘primitivity’, bows and arrows with backwardness, and gathering with scavenging. Media depictions of real hunts such as show in The Great Dance and The Hunters (1958) sometimes are associated by critics with mischievous attempts by the West to perpetuate debilitating myths about ‘Bushmen’. (Tomaselli, 2001:6 – 7)

Of course, a discourse of essentialist ‘authenticity’ assumes homogeneity among San peoples and cannot accommodate San sensibilities such as that expressed by Gadiphumulwe, interviewed at Ngwatle in June 1999, who stated that he “would like to move forward” (Quoted in Dodd, 2000:230). The filmmakers’ collaboration with the !Xo community in the making of the film that is documented in the press pack, however, and in an interview, Craig Foster claimed that the !Xo hunters as well as other San communities who were contacted via WIMSA were insistent that their skill as hunter-gatherers be represented. This skill, it seemed, offered them something of which to be proud in their San culture and heritage.
The Great Dance represents a number of the !Xo social practices and ways of understanding, which to a Western audience would be categorised as paranormal. In The Great Dance, however, these different ways of making sense of the world, are not constructed in terms of the previously popular understanding of the paranormal as priest-craft. Instead, the paranormal states of consciousness that the !Xo apparently occupy, are sympathetically and even romantically represented in The Great Dance, as legitimate, alternative ways of understanding.

According to Craig Foster, “We are looking at this from a single, rational, one-dimensional mind-set, and they are not. They have a twin-consciousness. They are looking at things in a different way and that’s the way of the human being. That’s how we are designed. We may be different now, but that’s our design. It’s very difficult to argue against that” (Interview, 16 November, Cape Town).

The Fosters claim that the San ways are good ways, even better ways than ‘our’ contemporary rationalistic ways. Within The Great Dance, where the paranormal states of consciousness occupied by the !Xo hunters involve a deeper commune with nature and other animals and creatures, the romanticisation of the imagined San mysticism can be understood as the filmmakers’ projection of a desire for a return to Eden before the Fall. This understanding of the San as a more legitimate version of humanity was expressed by Craig Foster himself when he said: “We’re still designed as hunter-gatherers. You can’t get around that because for 99% of our time as humans here on Earth, that’s what we have done. Our human design, our minds, bodies and spirit have not had time to change to anything other than hunter-gatherers. So, at least people can identify, simply because that’s our background” (Interview, 16 November 2002, Cape Town).

Although the !Xo are constructed as occupying a different system of consciousness, the Fosters would nonetheless have us believe that we can access their different ways of understanding and understand them ourselves. The Great Dance, invites us to both watch the !Xo’s paranormal experiences ‘from the outside’ and to ‘see through their eyes’ and ‘become’ the Other, to identify with the hunters’ experiences and experience what they experience. This idea of the accessibility of the Other’s paranormal states of consciousness keys into an evolutionary discourse, as is discussed earlier in this dissertation. This consists of the Western Self
Inviting us to ‘watch from the outside’, the mysticism of the !Xo people is discussed and explained quite overtly in *The Great Dance* through the use of narration and explanations given by the hunters in the film, which are subtitled in English. The subject matter of ‘a hunter’s story’ is heavily imbued with cosmological (or ‘mystical’) significance, which is evident even in the Fosters’ choice of the film’s title, *The Great Dance – a hunter’s story*. This immediately makes a connection between hunting and dancing, where “dancing amongst the San has religious and healing significance” (Tomaselli, 2001:6). This connection is further highlighted by the opening titles that read: “IXAÂ is the word for DANCE in the !Xo of the Kalahari and also means to REVERE or to show ONENESS”. What is suggested by making this connection is that hunting for the !Xo people, like dancing, involves revering and showing oneness.

The *Great Dance* challenges popular Western understandings of what it is to be a hunter, where according to Tomaselli

> The ‘Great White Hunter’, usually a man of integrity and cultural understanding, is in cinema, eg., in *Out of Africa*, a classless individual who often represents counter-racist tendencies. Where these hardy men are a social and sexual ideal (Cameron 1994), now, in the guise of adventure tourists they tend to be lazy slobs who kill from the comfort and safety of 4x4s and helicopters ... They are more interested in trophies and pictures of their ‘kills’ to show off back home than in the meat and its life sustaining qualities, social means of distribution, and cosmological meaning. (2000:21)

The opening titles of *The Great Dance* suggest that, unlike the tourist hunters, the !Xo’s relationship to hunting is far more spiritual and has a deep cultural significance beyond its function of supplying food for the community. “‘Tracking is Dancing’ and dancing, as all anthropologists know, embodies ontological significance” (Tomaselli, 2000:79). The !Xo understanding of hunting as dancing is understood by the Fosters as ontologically significant in that it represents an integrated worldview that the San are understood to possess that is more in tune with nature than ‘the Western mind’ which has lost contact with ‘nature’ and makes the perilous mistake of separating man from nature. According to the representations in *The Great Dance*, the !Xo’s hunting and dancing practices are as much an expression of their connection to nature as an expression of their connection to god, where the !Xo cosmology plays a large role in their practical day-to-day experiences and ways of making sense of life. The film’s press pass suggests that “there is a constant need to propitiate God to supply food and rain to the people. Hunting tattoos, trance and song are means of doing this. Food and
The !Xo’s concept of Bi-hi-sabolo, their god, is explained in the film itself through the narration that tells us that “all these things are because of our god, Bi-hi-sabolo. Bi-hi-sabolo put us in this land. Bi-hi-sabolo gave us, the First People, fire ... Bi-hi-sabolo made the Earth. Bi-hi-sabolo made the people and he made the animals. He made the grasses. He made the trees. He made the waterholes and the pans. He made the rainy time and the cold time and the dry time. Bi-hi-sabolo put us in this land”.

The !Xo cosmology, centres around their belief in one powerful god, who provides for them and who favours them. The !Xo appear in The Great Dance to believe that they are god’s favoured people, which is evident when the voice over claims: “We are the chosen ones. We are the ones Bi-hi-sabolo chose to give fire”. This idea is supported by the understanding, which is expressed in the film that their successes in hunting animals to feed their community are a result of Bi-hi-sabolo’s favour and interference. Where the hunters manage to kill an animal it is because Bi-hi-sabolo has put that animal aside for them. This favour is won, in part, through dancing. “We dance to be blessed by Bi-hi-sabolo with rain”, the narrator tells us.

Faced with changed circumstances where the !Xo community must function within the larger South African society and engage with ‘modern secularism’, ‘dance’ also plays a particularly ontologically significant role. “Dancing/healing provides an integration between the modern secularism of the world in which the San now find themselves and traditional cosmologies by which they negotiate this world” (Tomaselli, 2001:6-7), and if hunting is, for the !Xo people - dancing, dancing is also for healing, for rain, for God’s favour and for community cohesion. According to the filmmakers, “the San do not separate hunting from tracking from dancing from storytelling from trance. In this way, a true hunter’s story encompasses a holistic demonstration of the power of living with the land, the people and the animals. It is only the Western mind that separates and misunderstands” (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000).

The filmmakers’ understanding of the San people as possessing a ‘truth’ or Eden-like oneness with nature and Innocence before the Fall, can be understood as a projection of the filmmakers’ anxieties about the uncertainty and disconnectedness of post-industrial and postmodern life. This desire to return to Innocence and an understanding of the !Xo people as victims of modernity who are at risk of losing this innocence, is further reflected by Louis Herman who critiques The Great Dance and is quoted in the press pack as saying:

San culture, apart from its intrinsic beauty, has some potentially life saving lessons for industrial society: “those lazy people who don’t know hunting who want to share our meat. We are not happy because you must know the ways of the animal
and their governments are not only oblivious of the need to learn
from a hunting and gathering culture but we contravene basic human rights in denying the hunters’ access to the land and
animals they need to live it; resources we stole from them in the first place. It is all too much. One cannot see the movie,
understand this and not want to do something to help. (Louis Herman quoted in The Great Dance Press Pack, 2000)

Knowing the ways of the animal, is a central element of the hunt by running that is explored in The Great
Dance. This ‘knowing’ is not only studying the tracks and understanding the behaviour patterns of the animals
that the !Xo hunters hunt, but involves a paranormal practice of actually ‘becoming’ the animal.

“Charlie Handley, a zoologist at the Smithsonian Institution, who accompanied the Marshalls on the 1952
expedition, commented that the San: “could actually think like the animal enough so that they soon knew what
its strategy was, where it was going…” (Handley, interview, Feb. 26th, 1997, with Tomaselli and John P. Homiak
Dance attempts to cinematically recreate this experience of ‘becoming’. This becoming involves feeling the
sensations of animals, having premonitions of seeing animals before they are visible, knowing what the hunted
animal will do before it does it and taking the animal’s strength from it. As !Nqate Xqamxebe explains: “When
you track an animal - you must become the animal. Tracking is like dancing, because your body is happy –
you can feel it in the dance and then you know that the hunting will be good. When you are doing these things
you are talking with God” (Quoted in The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000).

**Becoming the Other**

*The Great Dance* represents a two-fold ‘becoming’ where the hunters ‘become’ their prey by entering into the
minds of the animals they are tracking, and the film’s audience is similarly encouraged to ‘enter into the minds’
of the San subjects of the film, and with this ‘becoming’, the audience sees what the San hunters see and so
the audience, with the San hunters, also enters the minds of the animals. The process of the hunters
‘becoming’ the animals they hunt is at the centre of what the Fosters are aiming to represent in *The Great
Dance*, but this becoming is, in turn, represented cinematically by using traditional Western cinematic
techniques of identification and filmic signifiers of ‘altered states’. Alan McKee explains this practice as a
typical trend in the representation of aboriginality by a non-aboriginal Self, where “the dangerous difference of
Aboriginality is controlled by articulating it within well-known Western narratives of what is unknown” (McKee,
1997d:201).
The San hunters’ experiences of ‘becoming’ are interpreted by the Fosters and then encoded using signs that Western audiences, through a long cinematic tradition and a subsequent learnt literacy in film language, are able to decode. Although the meaning of any cinematic representation is variable according to who is decoding the signs and the subjectivity of the individual audience member, preferred readings are predictable. These preferred readings can be predicted according to the dominant prevailing discourses, the limitations of genre and the repeated use of certain signs in certain ways that result in signs suggesting meanings beyond the actual pro-filmic object the film signs represent. Like any language, film language carries with it ‘rules’ or accepted ways of arranging signs to suggest broader meanings and these ‘rules’ limit the ways in which signs are understood. So, although a large range of conversations can be conducted using one language and these conversations can be diversely interpreted, dominant understandings of what is being ‘said’ when language is used in a certain way, are generated. In a similar way, dominant understandings of cinematic ‘conversations’ between those who share a language, in this case those sharing a mainstream Western cinematic tradition, can be predicted. In this way, by representing the San hunters’ psychological state, using cinematic language and conventions, the Fosters mediate between the San subjects and the audience’s understandings of the pro-filmic event of the hunters hunting. This mediation is not, however, acknowledged in the film or in its subsequent publicity material.

The press pack tells us: ‘This is an intimate film about their own experiences as expressed by them – in their words and through their eyes; what hunting and tracking mean to them from an experiential (emotional and intellectual), a physical (survival) and a historical (the old days versus the present reality) perspective. This is the art, science, raw and undiluted experience of hunting and tracking’ (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000).

This statement disguises the Fosters’ influence in shaping what we see of ‘their’ experience. The story is not told by the !Xo subject community. Elements of what the !Xo subject people have said have been selected and through a process of commission and omission the Fosters have created their own version of the community’s experience. The Fosters interpret the hunters’ expressions and actions and what the San hunters say about their experiences in terms of the Fosters’ own subjectivities and understandings of what those expressions, actions and words signify and in terms of the Fosters’ understandings of ‘reality’. They then, in turn, represent their understanding through the use of film signs and codes, which individual audience members decode according to their subjectivities and understandings of what these film signs signify and according to their own senses of ‘reality’.

The filmic representation of the hunters’ ‘becoming’ is then, in fact, a mediated representation of the Fosters’ decoding of a pro-filmic event (what the Fosters saw, heard, tasted, smelt and felt) and their subsequent re-
that we experience the hunt, but rather through the eye of the camera which was operated by Western filmmakers and then taken back to Cape Town where it was digitally manipulated on a sophisticated non-linear edit suite and pieced back together to form a deceptive illusion of continuous ‘reality’ through !Xo eyes of !Xo life. This ‘reality’ is constructed through the filmmakers’ selection, albeit in collaboration with the film’s subjects, of what is valid and what is not, and does not and cannot show the full diversity and complexity of the subject community’s ‘reality’.

As Tomaselli and Homiak point out: “The said and the unsaid are necessary to any film’s constitution and should be seen as mediations which derive from the perspectives and relationships of a researcher/filmmaker. These may be shaped by any number of factors. These include a prevailing scientific paradigm, the gender and subjectivity of the filmmaker, and the intended use or target audience” (1999a:158). The ‘reality’ shown is then a selected and distilled narrative of what the filmmakers (and a select few San collaborators) have decided is the ‘essence’ of ‘the !Xo experience’.

The representation of the Other becomes further problematic where the Other ‘actually’ does decode reality according to a different epistemological code. Also, if the Other represents those understandings to the Western Same in a language (linguistic, cinematic or other) that is different from the languages the Western Same understands, the limitation of meanings by the use of agreed upon codes, is far looser. To assume then that we, as audience members, can ‘know’ the San hunters’ ‘realities’ through decoding the Fosters’ representations of their decoding of the self-representations of the San is greatly presumptuous. It is especially presumptuous if we are to believe that the San hunters experience reality through an episteme that is different from Western scientific, rational approaches to making sense of “bundles of perceptions” (Hume, 1748).

Hence, the Fosters’ claim that they could “witness first-hand that intangible concept of ‘the hunter becoming the hunted’” (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000) and that they could then represent, via the cinematic medium, what they witnessed, is misleading. The representation of ‘altered states’ that are unfamiliar to Western audiences is extremely tricky. By recognising that these cinematic representations of the Other are mediated by filmmakers for decoding by the Western Self, one is able to critique less the subjects of the representations and their epistemes than the filmmakers’ subjectivities and discourses, and perhaps our own as Western media consumers for whom these representations have been made and marketed. The Great Dance is an interesting example of a film that uses cinematic codes that are intelligible to the Western Same in order to represent ‘altered states’, that are unfamiliar to Western audiences.
Taking the chasing hunt as its central interest, *The Great Dance* focuses on the mystical representation of the !Xo’s ‘paranormal’ practice of ‘becoming’ the hunted animal. According to the press kit, “hunting is fundamental to their culture, and in the film we develop this issue, culminating in the ‘chasing hunt’ where they have to ‘take over’ the animal’s mind in this ancient battle of human-animal endurance. This is the first time that anyone has photographed, filmed and documented in such detail, firsthand, this process where the ‘hunter becomes the hunted’” (*The Great Dance* Press Kit, 2000).

The filmmakers acknowledge that the San hunters’ ‘becomings’ are different from anything that the Western Self experiences, explaining that “the San are connected to the animals (especially the ones they hunt) in a strange and very non-European/industrialized world way. This relationship is multi-faceted; there appears to be a deep ‘religious’ connection and respect and yet they view animals as being on the same level as them, and thus have no deep moral dilemma about seeing them as food” (*The Great Dance* Press Kit, 2000).

But if the !Xo’s relationship to the animals is different from anything Western audiences have experienced ‘first-hand’, the Fosters would have us believe that *The Great Dance* offers us this !Xo hunting experience ‘first hand’.

The audience identification and illusion of ‘becoming the Other’ is constructed by the use of conventions such as point of view shots and a first person voice over. The English voice over, which identifies itself in the first moments of the film as the voice of !Nqate, offers the audience easy access into the consciousness of the !Xo hunter. The voice over apparently translates ‘his’ thoughts and comments on ‘his’ reality from ‘his’ perspective. The voice over supposedly takes the audience into the mind of !Nqate. It is a voice without a visible body speaking, which is similar to our experience of our own thoughts and inner voices that we hear without actually seeing ourselves speaking. The voice over then not only represents the thoughts and internal monologue of !Nqate but offers the audience this ‘inner voice’ as the audience’s inner voice. The experience of listening to a bodiless voice-over causes the audience to identify with the character whose voice we are supposedly hearing, by creating the illusion for the audience of being inside the character’s head.

Our responses to voice-overs are different from our responses to characters who we see speaking. Whereas the visible character is obviously an individual external to ourselves of whom we can be critical, the voice over seems to represent a character with whom we are far more intimate, in whose mind we seem to find ourselves.
The audience’s relationship to the voice-over encourages a less critical approach to what the voice-over says. The bodiless voice does not obviously belong to a subjective individual, but is an authoritative voice, even ‘the voice of God’. In *The Great Dance* the audience is asked to accept the film as a legitimate first-hand experience of !Nqate’s reality. By positioning the audience inside the mind of !Nqate, the audience is less critical or aware of the constructedness of the cinematic representations and is more easily able to identify with the eye of the camera as the eye of !Nqate.

The second major convention for creating audience identification that is employed in *The Great Dance* is the use of the point of view shot. This involves placing the camera in the position of the character and showing what the character sees. It is usually preceded by a shot of the character looking at something before the image cuts to what he is looking at. By doing this, the audience is offered a view ‘through his eyes’, which further enhances the illusion of the audience being in the mind of that character. In *The Great Dance* where the hunters ‘become’ the hunted and the audience must ‘become’ the hunter and therefore the hunted as well, point of view shots are used from both the hunters’ and the animals’ perspectives.

The filmmakers explain: “In order to try to get the experience from the peoples’ point of view as well as the animals’ point of view we have experimented with specially developed mini-cam technology and techniques to obtain these alternative perspectives. The viewer experiences these events first-hand whilst watching the film” (*The Great Dance* Press Kit, 2000). But if the audience is invited to ‘experience’ the ‘becoming of the other’ by being positioned in the place of both hunter and animal and by being invited to see what they see and identify with both hunter and animal, the audience also watches the !Xo hunters from perspectives outside of them.

The hunters’ ‘becoming’ the animals is represented by the juxtaposition of images of hunter and animal. An extreme close up of one of the hunter’s eyes is followed by the same size shot of the animal’s eyes. The hunters watch the animals and the animals watch the hunters. Images of the hunter’s running are intercut with images of the hunted animals running. Images of the hunters slicing up the animal meat are intercut with images of the hunters’ hunting scars where they have been sliced and bled in preparation for the hunt. The juxtaposition of images in this way conventionally suggests a comparison or a bond, but in *The Great Dance* this conventional type of juxtaposition is dexterously manipulated to not only suggest a comparison or a closeness but to suggest that the one is the other.

Whereas a conventional continuity sequence may involve a shot of someone running, followed by a shot of her footprints that the audience would assume were hers by virtue of the juxtaposition of the two shots, *The Great Dance* plays off these conventions and correlating audience assumptions to suggest that man and animal are
the same. For example, a shot of the animals’ hooves running through frame is followed by a shot of human footprints that are similarly framed and suggest movement in the same direction in which the animals were running. A shot of a hunter drinking from a water hole is followed by a shot of an animal’s reflection in the water.

Audio cues also suggest the ‘paranormal’ becoming, with dramatic music being used alongside distorted or magnified ‘natural’ sounds from that environment. What this manipulation of sounds suggests is that the experience is ‘real’ but it is an ‘altered state of reality’. The unity of man and animal is also signified aurally when, for example, the kudu is finally speared and she is about to die. We hear a slow and strange sounding heartbeat that is accompanied with slow motion visuals of both hunter and hunted, suggesting that this is the sound of both of their hearts. Most obviously though, the representation of the altered state of the hunters is mediated through language, where the voice over comments in English what the hunters experience, saying: “Now Karoha is becoming Kudu. No longer does he follow the tracks. He runs where they will run. He twists back where they will twist back. He runs among the thorns to chase them out of the shade. He drives them into the open. He does not slow down”.

The characters’ dialogue is also used in The Great Dance to explain to the audience the hunters’ experience of becoming the hunted animal. English subtitles translate the hunters’ conversation:

When I was running, I was really a kudu. It’s a long time since I felt like this. You think how hard Kudu is working. You feel it in your own body. You see it in the footprints. She is with you and your legs are not so heavy. When you feel Kudu is with you, you are now controlling its mind. Its eyes are no longer wild. You have taken Kudu into your own mind. As it tires, you become strong. You take its energy. Your legs become free. You run fast like yesterday. When you’ve killed the animal you still need strength to carry it home. (Subtitles of Karoha’s speech)

According to Crawford, allowing the subject community to speak for itself in the film and subtitling their conversations, is an agreeable method of representing the subject community’s ‘reality’ as accurately as possible. Their own understandings, albeit mediated through language and translation, of what a Western audience may call ‘paranormal’ are expressed with a matter-of-factness that is incongruous to a Western audience’s understandings of the paranormal. “But matter-of-factness does not in the San case interfere with what our culture regards as the mystical or paranormal. It is clear that !Nqate and the others are familiar on an everyday basis with the permutations of useful altered states--and not just in the healing dance context. They lead us to an understanding of the power of identification with the animal they are hunting” (Megan Bieseke quoted in The Great Dance Press Pack, 2000).
As Biesele suggests, the mysticism of the !Xo hunting practices is a projection of ‘our culture’ s epistemological paradigms onto the Other. The constructedness of this mysticism is evident by the difference in the way cinematic representations of events that the filmmaker believes to be ‘paranormal’ are represented compared to the representations of those which are not. For example, part of the !Xo practice of ‘becoming animal’ occurs on quite a literal level that is accessible to Western understandings, such as when the hunters ‘become’ the animals by enacting the animals’ behaviour. By reading the tracks and using empirical evidence such as the claw marks and wounds on an animal, broken plants nearby, saliva found on leaves and so on, the hunters are able to recreate the animals’ stories and re-enact them for each other. This ‘becoming’ is an integral part of the hunt by running, used practically to help the !Xo hunters catch their prey. This kind of ‘becoming’, however, is not represented as mystical because it fits comfortably into Western conventions of role-playing. The Western investigator may behave in a similar way, finding clues and from the evidence working out what happened in the past. The actor may also study an animal and imagine how the animal feels and moves and she may enact the animal’s behaviour. So, although this enactment is an interesting part of the ‘dance’ that is tracking and hunting and story-telling, it is not ‘mystical’ or paranormal. The representation of these enactments are correspondingly matter-of-fact in The Great Dance where wide frames, shot at normal speed, at eye level and without colour adjustments, show the hunters working out the animals’ stories and re-enacting them for each other. The representations of these scenes are noticeably different stylistically from the scenes that represent the hunters’ ‘altered states’.

This difference can be understood in terms of McKee’s claim that “the dangerous difference of Aboriginality is controlled by articulating it within well-known Western narratives of what is unknown” (McKee, 1997d:201). Where the behaviour of the !Xo hunters is not understood as ‘dangerously different’ from Western behaviour, there is no need to represent this activity in terms of the unknown or mystical. The altered state of the hunter ‘becoming’ the animal in such a way that he can feel sensations on his body where the animal’s markings are, has premonitions of the animal before it appears, and can control the animal’s mind, however, is ‘dangerously different’ from Western experience and hence is represented “within well-known Western narratives of what is unknown”.

A good example of a representation of an ‘altered state’ in terms of Western cinematic conventions is the scene where we see the !Xo community dancing for rain and we watch a healer swallow a red hot ember to increase his healing powers. A trance-like state is represented on film through a montage of strange images. The voice over that accompanies these images says: “The dance is hot. The fire is hot. The ember is hot. My hand is hot. My head is hot. My spirit boils. Bad things go away, get behind me. Bi-hi-sabolo, give me rain. Give me meat”.
The ‘altered state’ into which the healer enters is cinematically represented according to a code of representation that is popularly used to represent hallucinations. Recognisable images are distorted and dislocated from their contexts, music sounds strange and images symbolic of ‘spookiness’ appear and disappear: Images of animals float through space, an image of a skull appears and disappears, coloured water bubbles, one image dissolves into the next as if fading in and out of different consciousnesses. The sound is distorted, camera angles are tilted and off-balance. Feathers and shadows and firelight images appear over landscapes and rock paintings. The mythical narration that accompanies this says: “In the past times the old ones marked the stones. They tell how they journeyed to faraway places while dancing. They show the creatures they saw in that other world”.

The Fosters accommodate the paranormal experience of the !Xo hunters by framing it within the context of myth. This mythical atmosphere is achieved by the use of symbols that serve to distill the ‘San experience’ into a timeless essence. These symbols are images of San rock paintings, shadows and silhouettes. The dominant presence of shadows and silhouettes in the representation of the !Xo in The Great Dance, reminiscent of Plato’s cave, represents the !Xo as ‘pure forms’. As such they are understood as more ‘authentic’, living a more real ‘reality’ than non-aboriginal Western audiences, which are trapped in the cave and can only partly understand the ‘truths’ of Man before the Fall. This reference distills the !Xo people into the ‘essence’ of ‘mankind’, Man before the Fall. Also, by frequently framing only hands or feet or showing the hunters in silhouette or shadow, the distinctive and individual features of the hunters are frequently not visible and in this way the individual identities of the hunters give way to more general representations that could signify generic ‘mankind’, the San as living embodiments of ‘our’ “collective unconscious” memory of ‘our’ lost innocence.

Furthermore, by collapsing the distinction between man and nature, The Great Dance represents the !Xo not only as the essence of humanity, but as the essence of Africa. The Fosters themselves, refer to their film, ‘a hunter’s story’, as being ‘the voice of Africa’: “We specialise in non-fiction films that embrace the unique aspects and primal power of Africa, in a fresh and unusual way. We tell stories with the voice of Africa herself, and create film experiences, which enable the viewer to gain an intense and deep insight into the natural and cultural dynamics of this ancient continent” (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000).

Some of the most obvious cinematic manipulations that are used to create a sense of the paranormal, the mythical and the San’s place in nature as the essence of Africa, are the unnatural representations of the environment. The film is structured in cycles that are interspersed with stop-motion images of rolling clouds and dramatic skylines. At one point, even when the hunters are shown moving at normal speed, the sky is
The unnaturally fast. Frequently in these dramatic scenes of rolling clouds, sunsets and stormy nights, the !Xo characters are framed as small people in wide frames of mainly sky. The unnaturalness of the manipulated sky images suggest 'altered states of reality' and the smallness of the San people in the pictures of them in their environment help to construct the myth of 'man against nature'. The colour in these scenes is often saturated, either shot at dusk or dawn, or manipulated in postproduction. The results are postcard-perfect images of man in nature, frequently appearing in silhouette against 'African skies' or with herds of animals running past in the background. These are the postcard images of 'African adventures' and the romantic images of Rousseau-esque natural man (JanMohamed, 1983:269), a mythical reconstruction of Utopia before the Fall.

Finally, the distortion of time by using frequent slow motion shots of both the hunters and the animals further enhances the representation of the paranormal and mythical, in Western terms. Slow motion is conventionally used to signify mythical/mystical/dreamlike states as well as memories and moments of high drama or emotion. An example of the distortion of time being used to create tension is the shot of “an arrow almost arrested in space in slow motion Prince of Thieves style” (Tomaselli; 2000:79), in which the act of hunting is distilled and romanticised in a moment of ‘altered reality’. In The Great Dance the slow motion images of the !Xo hunters and of ‘their world’ create a mythical atmosphere that suggests timelessness and harmony, that all is as it always has been and the way it should be.

A Critique of the Making of The Great Dance

As Marshall points out, documentary films about real people always have consequences for the represented subject communities. It is with this understanding that Dodd asks the question: “Does The Great Dance move media documentation on the Other, the San, to a more understandable betterment of a people’s culture – anthropologically, historically, socially?” (2002:223) I have already made some notes about an ethnographic filmmaking ‘best practice’ as espoused by Crawford, and using this as a useful departure point, I would like to discuss the making of The Great Dance and the nature of the representations of the !Xo community in the film.

Firstly, it is interesting to note the Fosters’ own opinions about the nature of their film and their intentions behind representing the !Xo people as they have. For them the greatest power of non-fiction is its base in reality. Without losing this factual integrity we shift this genre gently across the edges of “conventional documentary” and into the realm of “cinematic experience”. We try to stimulate feelings and create impressions rather than simply to follow the action and catalogue facts. Our films are more poetry than prose, more
The Fosters do not claim that *The Great Dance* is a documentary but rather that it belongs to an intermediary genre between documentary and narrative film.

Although no media representation is capable of reflecting ‘reality’ but rather are *(media)tions of reality*, I have argued that where the representation of actual people is concerned, filmmakers are responsible for representing the subject peoples as accurately as possible. This can be done by adhering to filmmaking guidelines that limit the degree of cinematic manipulation used in the representation of real-life peoples. However, although the people represented in *The Great Dance* are real people and not fictitious characters portrayed by actors, the filmmakers admit to manipulating the film representations to induce emotional responses to the subject people and the on-screen action.

Furthermore, it is suggested that because a degree of manipulation or constructedness is unavoidable, the ideological position of the filmmakers and their role in constructing the film’s narrative should be declared within the film itself in order to contextualise the filmmakers’ cinematic representations and avoid constructing their narrative construction as indicative of an objective ‘reality’. The conscious manipulation confessed to in the making of *The Great Dance* is in contravention of some of the principles of ‘best practice’ as suggested by Crawford, and involves a skewing of the ‘reality’ they represent that is not acknowledged in the film itself.

It is worth noting, however, that “in some significant respects *The Great Dance* does make inroads into progression [Sehume and Dodd 2001:2]. The fact that the film was based on original field recordings of !Nqate Xqamxebe indicates a degree of participation by the San in their representation” (Dodd, 2002:223). The Fosters spent over a year on and off in the Kalahari, researching the ways of the !Xo community and commendably returned to the Kalahari with a rough cut of the film to elicit responses and suggestions from the subject community, which were embraced and used in the final structuring of the film. In this way, the filmmakers went a long way towards empowering their subject community by offering the !Xo people some control over their representation in the film. Nonetheless, regardless of how much research and collaboration took place, the Fosters’ claims that the film can simultaneously be “firmly rooted in fact” and emotionally manipulative are naïve.

By drawing attention to the constructedness of a text, Crawford believes the filmmaker can represent something ‘closer to reality’, where the audience is encouraged to critically engage with the film as a constructed narrative rather than as a ‘simple’ representation of ‘reality’. This is done through ‘reflexivity,
underlining that ‘this is a film by revealing the presence of the camera and film crew’ (Crawford, 1992:77). In *The Great Dance* though, the crew are never seen or heard. Instead, the illusion of experiencing !Xo reality ‘first hand’ is created through the use of a voice over that claims to be the voice of !Nqate, but which is, in fact, the voice of a voice artist speaking a scripted narration. The filmmakers note that “the script is based on the words of the hunters themselves. The rough-cut was taken back to the Kalahari for them to comment on” (*The Great Dance* Press Kit, 2000), but the words of the hunters were edited and structured by the filmmakers and then recorded as a continuous ‘internal monologue’ of a real individual hunter. By using the technique of a voice over, the constructedness of the narration is disguised. The audience is not encouraged to be critical of the bodiless voice that is established, through Western cinematic conventions, as a ‘voice of authority’. It is for this reason that Crawford suggests that a best practice for documentary filmmaking is “very limited use of narration or commentary and other ‘digital’ and ‘authoritative’ devices” (1992:77).

Crawford also suggests “exploratory or intuitive use of the camera, which means no scripts” (1992:77). *The Great Dance* press kit claims that “the film and story was never prescribed in advance. Rather, the real story was allowed to evolve over a period of two years in a continual process of shooting, editing, shooting and editing” (*The Great Dance* Press Kit, 2000). It is clear from the documentation of the filmmaking process in the press kit, that the filmmakers did not begin the project with a script and no part of the film was acted, rehearsed or reshot. Yet, by selecting and editing material, the Fosters did construct a film narrative that cannot be understood as unmanipulated or unmanaged ‘truth’. The film’s list of credits supports this critique, where writers, sound designers, foley artists, colour correction artists and animal handlers are listed amongst the long list of crew involved in making the film.

Crawford does not only suggest that a film be unscripted, but he also limits editing as a part of ethnographic best practice filmmaking. Contrary to this guideline, *The Great Dance* was edited together from a large body of video material. The cutting pace is fast and is frequently edited in the style of a music video with images being cut rhythmically and symbols and visual metaphors being juxtaposed with footage of the actual action. This changes the meaning of the represented action and manipulates audience reactions and emotional responses. In *The Great Dance*, material is selected and arranged to support the narration and in this way, despite the fact that material was shot over two years without staging events, *The Great Dance* is to a greater rather than a lesser extent a manipulation of ‘reality’.

Although it is hinted at in the film itself that new ways of hunting are now in place, the film does not overtly admit that what the Fosters have done is encourage a re-enactment of past hunting practices. In the press pack however, the Fosters admit to the pre-planning of their film and their encouragement of the San hunters
to undertake this kind of hunt, which is an act not dissimilar to the process of anthropological restoration used by, among others, Marshall in *The Hunters*:

We strapped ourselves onto the top of the 4x4, while the hunters checked the wrappings on their spears and sipped a little water. We agreed with them that the vehicle was not to provide them with any water during the hunt, as we wished to capture their full ability and skill, just as they would normally perform the hunt on their own, without us there. They thought this was a strange idea, that we would be there but not help them, but they agreed to the conditions — to them it was about getting the animal and the importance of feeding their children. They welcomed a little help, as there was a good chance of dehydration; we wanted them to express their true skill and power. (*The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000*)

This interaction is never shown in the film and, in fact, the presence of the filmmakers is not ever acknowledged. This is significant because the very presence of white city people with cameras would inevitably change the behaviour patterns of the !Xo subject people. Also, singling out three individuals from the community to become the central characters of the film could have elevated the status of those individuals. This may again have rocked the power or leadership dynamics of the subject community.

In order to create the illusion of the undisturbed ‘reality’ of the hunters’ action, “miniature camera systems were designed to be mounted on the animals that they spoke about – cheetah, springbok and birds” (*The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000*). Cameras were also attached to the hunters’ spears and arrows and were buried beneath animal carcasses, so as not to disturb the hunt in progress. In this way the Fosters’ approach is differentiated from narrative fiction filmmaking practices where a hunt sequence may be planned and shot repeatedly in short sections from various angles and then later pieced together to create an illusion of continuous uninterrupted action. But, although the Fosters were careful not to interfere with the hunt in progress, the act of the San hunters performing this type of hunt at all is a manipulation of ‘reality’ which is hidden from the film’s audience. Furthermore, the way in which the hunt sequence is filmed and edited shapes the audience’s reading of the hunt and their emotional responses to it.

The use of music is also a hugely manipulative device that arouses emotion in audiences and can alter the preferred meaning of a visual sequence. The power of music and sound to manipulate meanings is understood by Crawford who suggests that, if a representation of ‘reality’ is to be as ‘real’ as possible, little non-synchronous or unauthentic sound should be used. In opposition to this suggestion, the soundtrack in *The Great Dance* plays a large role in constructing the mood and meaning of the film.

The Fosters used “organic and natural sounds and the traditional musical instruments of Africa. The role of trance, dance, ritual and celebration are further inspiration” (*The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000*). The Fosters also used songs sung by the community and “at least half of the songs are untouched recordings from the San
singers and musicians whose extraordinary music has its origins as long ago as 30 000 years. The music can sound strange to the western ear and was banned by the colonial settlers in some areas” (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000). That the Fosters recognise the power of music is clear from their comments that this music is “an art form that holds the integrity of the individual while also expressing the power of the community, a rich and deep sound that plays to the essence of human nature” (The Great Dance Press Kit, 2000).

Finally, Crawford’s guideline suggests that commentary within a documentary film should be given through “culturally neutral techniques” (1992:77) such as captions, or through the use of the dialogue of the film’s subjects or the subtitling of their discussions.

I have already discussed the use of a voice over in The Great Dance, but the conversations between the hunters are also used as ‘interior commentary’ in The Great Dance and are subtitled in English. These scenes do offer some unmanipulated insights into !Xo opinions and understandings. The reinforcement of these ideas through the use of mythical voice over narration and symbolic and slow motion images does, however, elevate the three individual hunters’ opinions by representing them as typical of the mythical and essential San. The voice over, in agreement with the San hunters’ conversations, disguises the hybridity of the San communities and the diversity of individual opinions. This distills the experience of the three subject individuals into ‘the San experience’.

Renegotiating Essentialist Positions

The representations of the !Xo people in The Great Dance position them as the mythical essence of humanity and of Africa, living in a state of Innocence before the Fall that is now threatened by modernity. It can be argued that this film serves to capture the !Xo people’s identities as essentialist and ‘authentic’, which is counterproductive to their integration into, and successful negotiation of their places within South African society. Furthermore, it can be argued that the representation of the San in this way is a projection of neo-colonial anxieties and desires. But, despite my critique of The Great Dance as a consciously constructed narrative of the filmmakers' understandings of San ‘reality’, the Fosters’ extended collaboration with the !Xo community and their accountability to them suggests that the Fosters’ construction coheres with the !Xo hunters’ own narratives of their ‘reality’.

Craig and Damon filmed on and off in the Kalahari for over a year, a lot of that actually in the central Kalahari. James joined them in the field for a part of that time. Craig returned to the Kalahari with a rough assembly of the footage six months after filming there and showed the footage to the hunters and their families. Their response was extraordinary in its enthusiasm and Craig was able to get their appraisal of the sequences and much more detailed information in their own
It is boasted in the press kit too that “The Great Dance – a hunter’s story” voiced by Sello Maake Ka-Ncube from TV’s Generations, is the first film ever to be fully supported by WIMSA” (Press Kit, 2000).

Reactions of other San peoples outside of the !Xo community have also been favourable:

University educated Belinda Kruiper in August 2000 said she was at “peace with this film maker” in “the way the film and the movement and the energy, catching the truth and the essence of what happened between man and beast” was portrayed. “[i]n getting a message across … he [the filmmaker/hunter] speaks to the animal and becomes the animal in the palming of the heart”. Of her hunter husband Belinda observed: “Vetkat could feel that by watching it. So he [the Fosters] got that message to the hunter, the feeling of the hunter” (see also Wieczorek, 1998). (Tomaselli, 2001:6)

But if the essentialist positions adopted by the Fosters in constructing The Great Dance have been accepted and embraced by some audience members, including some San audiences, resistant readings of the film recognise that the Fosters’ essentialist discourse is a contested one. Megan Biesele, quoted in the film’s press pack, offers one such reading in her claim that “the only thing especially ‘San’ about the hunting, tracking, spiritual, and social abilities portrayed in The Great Dance is the unbroken connection with many previous generations of skills teaching and local knowledge” (Quoted in The Great Dance Press Pack, 2000).

As is obvious from the above two comments alone, film ‘meaning’ is not stable, static or homogeneous. I have briefly discussed the ways in which preferred meanings are generated through the use of cinematic codes that have contingent significance based on conventions and traditions of how those film codes have been repeatedly used in the media over a long period of time. It is not only in the encoding of cinematic texts that ‘meaning’ is made, however, but also through the audience’s decoding of the film signs. The way in which a film is decoded is dependent on the subjectivities of the individual audience member and the context in which she watches the film. This accounts for the variety of readings that can be generated by a single film.

But if ‘meanings’ or film readings are influenced by the context in which the film is watched, these ‘meanings’ are also limited and controlled, to an extent, by the release and distribution of the film. For example, a film will be read differently if it is released and watched in an art cinema from if it is watched on daytime television. “There are certain socially sanctioned ways of consuming the texts of a given medium. These approaches to texts have implications for the interpretations that will be made … this fact has implications for the texts of Aboriginality which are produced, and for the ways in which these are consumed” (McKee, 1997b:162).
The release, distribution and marketing of a film creates certain audience expectations of that film, in coherence with cinematic conventions that an audience learns to anticipate, against or in accordance with which the audience member will ‘read’ the film.

The Release, Distribution and Marketing of The Great Dance

Tomaselli makes the point that “the question of film-maker intention is … crucial: for whom is the film/video being made – audiences (general or specialist), the subjects, and/or the film/video makers?” (1999:205)

The Great Dance was released in South Africa on 35mm film format and screened on big screens at art cinemas across the country, which is a rare format and release option for a documentary film. By screening the film in the cinema audiences are caused to expect a narrative film, and in the art cinemas audiences anticipate narrative films ‘with a difference’. The nature of the film’s release then manipulates the preferred reading of the film.

Furthermore, the release of the film as a film in art cinemas, determines to a large extent, the audience the film will reach. In South Africa, the limited number of art cinemas are located in wealthy suburbs for largely upper middle class audiences. The audiences that the film can be expected to reach are then far more homogenous than the broader South African audience that would have been reached should the film have been broadcast on a national television station. The film was later screened “from a mobile unit, to all settlements of bushmen throughout rural South Africa” (Duffett, 2001). This was an initiative that was thought up some time after the initial national release of the film, however, and hence although commendable cannot be seen as indicative of the intended audience for whom the film was made.

Most telling about the filmmakers’ and producer’s understanding of the film’s ‘meaning’ is their marketing strategy and their entry of the film into film festivals under the category of natural environment or wildlife films.

Producer Ellen Windemuth accepted three Wildscreen Panda Awards for the film in Bristol recently. The Great Dance won the Golden Panda for Best Film, Best Screenplay (by Jeremy Evans) and the Delegates’ Choice Award. WildScreen is often referred to as the “Oscars” of natural environment filmmaking and the Panda Award is the most prestigious recognition a work that a wildlife filmmaker could hope for. (Rix, 2000:12)

The categorisation of The Great Dance as a natural environment film further highlights the filmmakers’ discourse regarding the San community as essentially connected to the land and environment that is
modern people who are, like animals, under threat of ‘extinction’ due to the interference of modernity. Within this discourse, the promotional text of the film’s press pack continues by boasting that “The Great Dance won the WWF Golden Panda Award for “Best Film”. It was playing against steep competition, including the BBC/Discovery Channel’s Walking With Dinosaurs and Sir David Attenborough’s Life Of Birds” (2000).

This categorisation of The Great Dance as a wildlife film falls into the same controversial trap as the Diorama display at the South African Museum that was closed in 2001 as degrading to the San community because its context framed San people alongside animals and other wildlife instead of placing them within the context of the broader South African society and its socio-political history as ‘people like other people’.

But regardless of whether or not The Great Dance adhered to an ethnographic filmmaking guideline and aside from whether or not the representations of the San in this film are constructive or constrictive, some of the real-life effects of The Great Dance on San peoples have been very empowering. Most significantly, Craig Foster claims that The Great Dance was the first film about the San to ever be partly owned by the San peoples themselves. This ownership extends beyond the high level of involvement that the subject community were afforded in the decision-making processes of the film’s production, to include significant financial implications.

Under advisement from WIMSA, the Fosters negotiated a daily work rate with the three hunters who were the central subjects of the film. This rate was later voluntarily tripled by the filmmakers themselves. Most commendably, however, the filmmakers ceded a percentage of the ownership of the film to WIMSA who continue to receive a percentage of the film’s royalties, which is then distributed amongst all San communities. This arrangement recognises the San’s understanding of the communal ownership of San heritage and tradition, which would include the hunting and tracking skills that are represented in The Great Dance. Instead of belonging only to the three hunters, this skill is understood to belong to the entire San community, as the knowledge of tracking and hunting techniques is knowledge that has been handed down through many generations of San people. Craig Foster reports that this arrangement with WIMSA of part ownership of films made about the San has since become standard practice insisted on by WIMSA.

In answer to Dodd’s question regarding whether The Great Dance involves a betterment of “San people’s culture – anthropologically, historically, socially” (2002:223) - on a financial level, the part ownership of the film by the San community has made significant inroads into empowering San peoples. This has been done through the financial gains from this film and also by setting a new benchmark which future films about the San have been, and will continue to be, asked to reach.
JanMohamed believes that colonial/post-colonial texts are divided into two separate camps. The first includes texts that attempt to resolve contradictions in the colonialist situation and hence reinforce the legitimacy of colonialism or a neo-colonial status quo. The second camp includes those texts that highlight the contradictions of this situation and are thus able to critique colonialism accordingly. JanMohamed is also eager to stress that texts do not merely depict a socio-political situation, but that the texts themselves form a part of one or other discourse. “To the extent that a text valorizes any aspect of a class ideology it lives – it actively engages in a political, albeit a symbolic act” (JanMohamed, 1983:266).

*The Great Dance*, as a construction of San peoples as essentially hunters and gatherers, essentially pre-modern and as victims of modernity, reinforces the status of San people as isolated apolitical people on the margins of society. In terms of JanMohamed’s distinction, and in spite of the filmmakers’ good intentions, this film resolves the San people’s neo-colonial situation by suggesting that the old days of their isolation in the desert and removal from society were the ‘good old days’. By calling for a return to the San’s former situation, the film does not offer a critique of the impact of colonisation on the San people or offer ways to move forwards into an integrated post-industrial society. Although the representations of the !Xo hunters are sympathetic they reinforce essentialist discourses about aboriginal people that corner San peoples into the double-bind of authenticity. As is claimed by Griffiths:

There are real dangers in recent representations of indigenous peoples in popular discourse, and especially in the media, which stress claims to an ‘authentic’ voice. For these claims, by overwriting the actual complexity of difference may write out that voice as effectively as earlier oppressive discourses of reportage. In fact, it may well be the same process at work, and the result may be just as crippling to the efforts of indigenous peoples to evolve an effective strategy of recuperation and resistance. (Griffiths, 1995:237)
CHAPTER 3

REPRESENTING AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINALS IN AUSTRALIAN FILM

An overview of the key trends in the representation of Australian Aboriginals

Australia's post-colonial status and the question of national identity

“For Australia ... the post-colonial situation is not just an ‘academic’ one, it is divided between its Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal political aspects ... All Australians [however] are caught up in a complex process of self-definition as the country slowly becomes more independent from Europe, and in particular from the UK” (Meucke, 1992:10). This complex process of self-definition that Meucke talks about is exacerbated by the fact that Australia is made up of not only British settlers and Aboriginal people, but a wide variety of settler cultures, resulting in a heterogeneous multicultural society. But as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin testify, complex national identities are typical of settler colonies, which “have never been able to construct simple concepts of the nation, such as those based on linguistic communality or racial or religious homogeneity” (1995:151-152).

In 1989, Australia, recognising its heterogeneous make-up, adopted “multiculturalism as a national cultural policy of state ‘for all Australians’” (O'Regan, 1996:23) in an attempt to forge a national self-definition that would unify the diverse populations within Australia under the broad banner of ‘Australians’. O'Regan expands on the dilemma that this multiculturalism poses for the project of nationalism and Australian self-definition, where the ‘newness’ of the Australian nation as a settler colony has resulted in a definition of the Australian nation that assumes a willingness of Australians to discard their previous cultural identities in order to take on new ones of imagined Australian-ness. This process of defining the Australian nation involves “an assumption of existing native-born identities attenuating themselves sufficiently to accommodate this new presence” (O'Regan, 1993:93). He goes on to describe Australian national identity as “perpetually emergent”, where according to Lattas, “the continual questioning of who we really are is the essence of Australian nationalism. It produces the reflective space of distance, of removal, creating the alienation which we ascribe to ourselves as the secret truth constitutive of our identity” (Lattas quoted in O'Regan, 1993:93). But if Australia as an imagined national identity is characterised by an identity crisis, the question is posed as to where Aboriginal people fit into this narrative of provisional Australian nationalism.

O'Regan points out that in Australia “the cleavage between the indigenous and settler culture(s) has become increasingly central since 1970, when the logic and claim of Aboriginal and Islanders as first peoples began to be made in its contemporary form” (O'Regan, 1996:276). Although the 1950s and 1960s saw a demand by
Aboriginal people for equal rights and opportunities, the 1970s issued in claims by Aboriginals for land rights, self determination and native title, based on their understanding that “their historic ownership of their respective lands should entitle them to something more” (Sykes quoted in O'Regan, 1996:276).

O'Regan comments on the implications of an Aboriginal presence and Aboriginal claims to native title in Australia for non-Aboriginals, where “unlike the ‘problem’ identity for other Australians, Aboriginal and Islanders are seen as having a secure identity and sense of belongingness” (1996:276), and, as a result, are a reminder of settler peoples’ not belongingness. Beyond this, Australian Aboriginal activism is also a reminder to settlers of the process of colonisation itself and hence forces settler culture “to re-imagine itself not as victim of imperial predation and colonial or neo-colonial servitude, but as a perpetrator and oppressor of indigenous peoples” (O'Regan, 1996:276). This process of re-imagining colonial history, in turn, results in a re-imagining of Aboriginal and Islander identities, where Aboriginals and Islanders have come to constitute ‘the settler culture’s ‘original sin’ – they are the peoples whose country ‘we’ invaded, who ‘we’ dispossessed. Their dispossession is becoming – like slavery and the US state – the settler culture’s ‘original sin’, its genocide, its holocaust, its guilty history” (O'Regan, 1996:276).

The destabilising of the dominant Australian national narratives and the disintegration of the pioneer legend, according to O'Regan, “necessitates reconciliation as a public project” (1996:276). Hence, with the growing settler post-colonial awareness of the settler culture’s ‘original sin’ came a new settler spirit of reconciliation. This was reflected in the 1992 Mabo High Court Decision, which by “recognising the persistence of native title gave symbolic, public and legal recognition to settlement as a process of usurpation” (O'Regan, 1996:276). This historic event was the biggest and longest running media event in Australian history, which suggests that it keyed into dominant post-colonial anxieties and sensitivities regarding belongingness and entitlement in Australia.

Whereas earlier nationalisms and dominant national self-definitions were based on cultural boundary maintenance that insisted on the cultural unity of ‘the nation’ and the exclusion of the cultural Other from the nation’s definition (Curthoys and Meucke, 1993:179), a recognition of the entitlements of First People necessitated a new type of nationalism that had to accommodate cultural diversity. Accordingly, the Australian media responded to shifts in the dominant discourses regarding Australian nationhood, and recognition of cultural diversity has concomitantly been reflected in the media as “a foil to the continuing and hegemonic Anglo-Celtic, European and English-speaking society routinely produced in the mainstream cinema and television” (O'Regan, 1996:331).
The role of the media in constructing and projecting grand national narratives and self-definitions is evident in the range of cinematic representations of Aboriginal people in Australian cinema. These representations range from early colonial representations of the Other, in agreement with nationalist narratives of exclusion, to contemporary filmic negotiations of Aboriginal people’s place in multicultural Australia. According to O’Regan, in Australia “cinema serves as a vehicle of popular socialization and as a forum for telling uncomfortable truths about its society. Australian films and film institutions negotiate cleavages of ethnicity, gender, race, class and nation” (1996:10). But it is not only ‘truths’ that are reflected in the media, but constructed narratives that are both personally and politically motivated, and it is in the light of this that McKee’s claim that “cinema is a colonial medium” (1997:161), makes sense.

According to O’Regan, Australian cinema “acts as a social bond” (1996:17), where Australian film functions to reflect Australian culture and the relationships between cultural groups within the broader Australian society, back to Australia at large. Within the project of colonisation and neo-colonialism, the relationship between settlers and Aboriginal people is foregrounded, with over six thousand films having been made about Australian Aboriginals. These media images reflect relations between settlers and Aboriginal people and the anxieties and desires (both personal and political) of the media makers. With regards to the representation of Australian Aboriginals, Jennett makes the important observation that

media images of and messages about Australian Aborigines are constructed by non-Aborigines operating within the dominant Anglo-European cultural framework for consumption principally by those who share this framework. The reasons for this are located within the history of colonisation of Aborigines by Anglo-Europeans, whose powerful members retain cultural hegemony in Australian society; because they own the means of production, distribution and exchange they also control the dissemination of information about and images of minority groups. Nowhere has this been so all encompassing as in the case of the Aboriginal national minority. (Quoted in Mickler, 1998:50)

But McKee, in claiming that “cinema is a colonial medium”, goes beyond this suggestion that the media reflects the colonial project, to suggest that the very act of settler people representing Aboriginal people in the media, is a form of colonial control. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explain that “the most formidable ally of economic and political control had long been the business of ‘knowing’ other peoples because this ‘knowing’ underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly persuaded to know themselves: that is as subordinate to Europe” (1995:1). Furthermore, some post-colonial critics have claimed that “to be the object of another’s look is to be held powerless: that is, to be the subject of ‘visual imperialism’” (McKee, 1997b:161).
Donaldson claim that ways of seeing reflect power relationships and Homi K. Bhabha reinforces this point by noting that colonial representations of the Aboriginal Other construct the identity of the colonised as static and “entirely knowable and visible” (Quoted in McKee, 1997b:161). In the light of these understandings, cinematic representations are particularly informative of colonial, neo-colonial and post-colonial dynamics between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in settler colonies. It is therefore the scope of this chapter to interrogate the ways in which Aboriginal people have been represented in Australian film to not only reflect colonial and post-colonial narratives and ‘truths’ about Australian society, but also to create colonial and post-colonial realities through the use of the media.

An analysis of *The Last Wave*, directed by Peter Weir in 1977 will proffer a more detailed examination of some of these key trends, as it is particularly indicative of some of the main anxieties of the dominant settler culture within neo/post-colonial Australia: identity crises and anxieties regarding not belonging. These anxieties have, in part, been eased since the making of this film, through projects of reconciliation and the redefining of the Australian nation in terms of a more inclusive ‘multicultural’ model in which all inhabitants of Australia are considered as ‘belonging’ to the Australian nation. It is a fascinating study, however, as the representation of Australian Aboriginals within the film’s narrative is particularly reflective of common settler anxieties within post/neo-colonial nations and a settler need to re-imagine their identities as settlers.

**Categories of Aboriginal representation**

Meucke makes the strong claim that “Europeans in Australia have made three fairly well-worn tracks in their discourses on Aborigines. They are the Anthropological, the Romantic and the Racist” (1992:23-24). This categorisation intersects with other schemas of categorising cinematic representations of Aboriginal people, some of which are mentioned in Chapter One. This is a useful starting point from which to look at the representation of Australian Aboriginals in Australian cinema.

Despite the fact that the representation of Aboriginal people in Australian cinema has been disproportionately high since the beginning of the Australian film industry, these representations of Australian Aboriginals have largely placed them in marginal narrative positions, and as Other to not only the settler Self but also to the imagined Australian Self. O'Regan notes that “unlike New Zealand, Canada and the USA there is no long history of conceiving an Aboriginal nation within the Australian nation in the way the Maori nation and the first nations of Canada and the USA are configured. New Zealanders are always shocked at the formal lack of Aboriginal recognition on public occasions and in national representations” (1996:191). Instead, representations of an Aboriginal place within the Australian nation, as constructed through film narratives and
have largely positioned Aboriginal people outside the boundaries of a dominant and mundane Australian self-definition. Dominant discourses surrounding Aboriginality turn on either the ‘Aboriginal problem’ (O’Regan, 1996:1910) or traditional Aboriginal lifeways, “emphasizing, on the one hand, the documentary and social problem finding film-making and, on the other hand, Aboriginal Otherness in narrative and ethnographic treatment” (O’Regan, 1996:191).

These available discourses, the Anthropological, the Romantic and the Racist, are constructed in terms of Manichean definitions of the Other. The construction of Aboriginal otherness shifts according to shifts in the Self and is reconstructed in terms of a range of Other/Self identity axes, where the difference or otherness of Aboriginals is accordingly re-imagined.

Within contemporary Australia, however, which is self-consciously addressing its colonial past, the national media must respond to changing political climates and attempt to renegotiate the previously imagined difference between Aboriginal Other and colonial Self. O’Regan notes that accordingly, “Aborigines are being written back into the picture under pressure from Aboriginal and other activists. Some films – like Weir’s The Last Wave – undertake major revisions of the national identity in order to acknowledge the realities of dispossession and second class citizenship and question the moral legitimacy of the ‘white settler culture’” (1996:191). Although the nature of the personal and political anxieties and desires may have shifted from early colonial positions, more contemporary representations (The Last Wave was produced in 1977) nonetheless reflect the anxieties and desires of European settler media makers and reconstruct Australia’s shifting and continually ‘emerging’ nationhood, providing “a de facto social map for native audiences to situate themselves in culturally and personally” (Lewis quoted in O’Regan, 1996:18).

With the power to shape real-life social relations, films have political implications and film studies have the power to not only critique the films themselves, but the political narratives that these films reflect and construct. It is in the light of the political power of the media to negotiate social positions of cultural groups through their representation, that the prominence of social problem documentaries and narrative films that depict Australian Aboriginals as social problems should be questioned. These documentaries and films are potentially damaging to Australian Aboriginal people who must negotiate their places in contemporary multicultural Australia.

**Anthropological representations - Australian Aboriginality represented as a social problem**

In the past decade, attempts have been made to redefine Australia as a multicultural society – the latest in a series of terms (assimilation, integration) formulated around the country’s social practices. At the basis of this project has been a serious engagement with the ideas of race, racism and culture – in particular, with Aboriginality – and part of this enquiry
Although early representations of Australian Aboriginals may have been romantic or fetishistic ethnographic constructions of prehistoric people, more contemporary Australian media is conscious of the political power of the media and the need to incorporate First Peoples into the national identity. As O’Regan is earlier quoted, since 1970 Australian Aboriginal political activism and claim to special rights as First People has forced non-Aboriginal Australians to reconsider their place in the narratives of Australian nationalism. Through the recognition of the Australian Aboriginal peoples’ “pride of place in a decolonising Australian nationalism” (O’Regan, 1996:276), the glory of the earlier pioneer legends is overthrown in favour of a settler position of guilt, where European settlers must recognise themselves as colonisers rather than the victims of British imperialism. The particularly socially depressed condition of many Aboriginal communities, as a result of the process of Aboriginal dispossession through colonisation and neo-colonialism, provided a visual reminder of settler culture’s guilty history. Australian Aboriginals became representative of the settler population’s ‘original sin’ and in light of Australia’s attempts to establish a multicultural Australia, Aboriginal people thus represented, for government, a social problem and obstacle to achieving the integrated, yet poly-ethnic Australian nationhood that was (and is) dominantly desired.

This narrative of Aboriginal people as a problem community was reflected in the media, particularly in the late 1970s and the 1980s in response to the heightened Aboriginal political activism in the 1970s and continuing into the 1980s. O’Regan offers a number of examples of films that represent Aboriginal people in this way:

Aboriginal male violence and drunkenness is a social problem in State of Shock. They are second class citizens forced into the bottom of the labour market in Lousy Little Sixpence (Alec Moran 1983). They are the most disadvantaged minority in One Australia? They are a problem for policing as an unruly and homeless people in Genocide (Oxenburgh 1990). They are often welfare-dependent (significantly the collaboration documentary, Two Laws, defines one of its breakdowns of their history as ‘welfare times’). (1993:189)

And, as will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, they are represented as problematic and ill adjusted to the dominant social order in The Last Wave (1977).

O’Regan observes that Aboriginal peoples have been constructed as victims in documentary and social problem films, to a far greater degree than any other social group. He also makes the point, however, that these media representations are, to some extent, reflective of a pro-filmic reality, where Australian Aboriginals are largely socially depressed and “Aboriginal lifeways and aspirations are in many cases bounded by chronic social crisis manifested in alcoholism, violence, unemployment and homelessness, stemming from the
Representations of Aboriginals as a problem community, however, are divided between both sympathetic and unsympathetic representations of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal Australian filmmakers.

Whether representations of social depression are framed within the context of colonisation and neo-colonial oppression, or not, distinguishes media representations of Aboriginal political concerns and settler guilt from racist representations of Aboriginal people as essentially different and problematic. If their depressed situation is recognised as stemming from the effects of colonisation, the Australian settlers are guilty of inflicting this situation upon them. These politicised representations are then motivated by the neo-colonial guilt of the settler filmmakers and a desire to integrate Aboriginal people into the broader Australian society and hence annihilate the embarrassing reminder of the settler population’s ‘original sin’. The exercise of representing Aboriginality as a social problem, can, however, be counterproductive to the goal of social integration. Mickler notes that “Aboriginality in Australian media has figured in journalism broadly as a problem of social governance and is historically a distinct and unique domain of governmental attention” (1998:46). But, if these media representations construct Aboriginality as a “distinct and unique domain of governmental attention”, Aboriginal people cannot simultaneously be imagined as ‘people like other people’ in an integrated Australia, as the multicultural mandate of Australia would like them to be.

McKee comments that representations of Aboriginality in the Australian media have constructed Aboriginal subjects in terms of duty, burden and guilt. The predominant representation of Aboriginal people in news and social problem documentaries has ensured that “rather than being presented as a focus for pleasure, indigeneity has been offered as something about which people should be informed, a form of civic duty” (McKee, 1999b:142).

Where some social problem documentaries represent the social depression of Aboriginal people as a result of colonisation and on-going socio-political oppression, however, other representations of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ are not explained in terms of political context and historical oppression. These representations are more dangerous to a project of Australian integration, where Australian Aboriginals are represented as the dangerous Other – not victims of modernity but as degraded savages.

As the Manichean counterpart to the white European settler Self, Australian Aboriginals have, according to Trigger, had an exaggerated press profile in the 1980s. No other group within Australia represents, as clearly, settler culture’s ‘guilty history’ and in terms of the Economy of the Manichean allegory, the wrongs of the colonisers and their guilt is projected onto the colonial Self’s Other, by imagining the Other as quintessentially
the discourses of the mediamakers, but constructs dominant social discourses and the social relations between represented groups, and hence much of the academic criticism of the representation of Aboriginality in the Australian media shares a common concern with the latter’s implications for race relations, governmental policy and Aboriginal freedom and equality. More specifically, with issues such as the frequent presentation of indigenous people according to criminal and anti-social stereotypes and tropes, and media and publicity campaigns hostile to Aboriginal rights, entitlements and claims. This focus has been prompted by the awareness of both the general and immediate social implications and effects of such coverage – ranging from reproducing and popularising racist stereotypes, creating public climates of racist violence, and contributing to conditions favourable to regressive and destructive government action and policies (discriminatory crime laws, police harassment, sacred sites violations) or inaction (health, housing, education and employment neglect, indifference to persecution and poverty). (Mickler, 1998:46-47)

Trigger’s (1995) study of the representation of Aboriginal people in Western Australian news backs up Mickler’s thesis that media representations of Aboriginals as criminal, violent and socially problematic impacts on real-life politics and dominant public opinion. Trigger’s study revealed that the disproportionate prominence of stories about Aboriginals and the disproportionate level of negativity in these stories in the Western Australian press, was causally linked to “racist and ill-informed ideas about Aboriginality” (Mickler, 1988:47-48) amongst non-Aboriginal media consumers.

Resistant to these racist representations of Aboriginality as described by Trigger, Aboriginal representations in the 1980s, particularly in Western Australia, came to the fore as

a political con-testation, which sought to present a dignified and normal face in spite of the mass onslaught of the visual and print media which sought to keep alive the more negative stereotypes of a dubious “race” of troublemakers whose demands, if not frivolous, could threaten the economic well-being of the state and were potent sources of disruption affecting not only the totalised state but its individual citizens. (Johnson, 1987)

The dominant forms of representing Aboriginality in the 1980s in Australia in terms of a social problem can then be divided into two main trends: representations that show Aboriginal people as ‘people like other people’ and the Aboriginal ‘social problem’ as an effect of historical and political causes; and representations that disguise the socio-political causes of the Aboriginal peoples’ social depression and show Aboriginals themselves as essentially problematic.

The representation of Australian Aboriginals within a political context as victims of colonisation, however, is also problematic. Although this kind of representation may avoid the pitfalls of representing Aboriginal people
representations position Aboriginal people as victims and place them in the socialscape of Australia in confrontation with settler people. McKee makes the valuable point that not only the dominance of these representations but also the genre in which they are presented, shapes public opinion about Aboriginal identities, where news and documentaries are imagined to represent ‘the truth’. He notes that news reporting and documentaries on Aboriginal subjects insist that “Aboriginal Australians live lives only of poverty, crime, violence – and that this is the only ‘reality’ of Aboriginality in Australia. Anything which belongs to the iconography or lifestyle of middle-class existence - home ownership, suburbia, education, white-collar jobs – cannot be part of the ‘truth’ of indigenous existence in Australia” (McKee, 1999b:143). This obscures the complexity and diversity of the multiple and changeable identities and social positions of Aboriginal people. It also does not allow for a narrative of settler-Aboriginal harmony and co-existence.

O’Regan argues that Australian cinema has a characteristic habit of representing Australians as freaks and of highlighting the negative elements of Australian culture, and that representations of Aboriginal-settler conflict can be understood in terms of this trend. But, O’Regan also makes the point that the excessively negative representation of Australians is not representative of a correspondingly negative pro-filmic ‘reality’. He writes:

Parts of Australian culture are monstrous – but no more monstrous than parts of other cultures. The difference is that Australian self-denigration is an important component of the culture along side its celebratory self-promotion. It is a disarming feature of Australian film-making and culture generally that it should be so prepared to emphasise and dramatise the worst parts of the culture; and to present these as representative of it. (O’Regan, 1996:249)

Marcia Langton makes the point that by choosing to emphasise the negative in Australian culture, some stories are premised over others. In relation to representing post/neo-colonial relations between settler culture and Aboriginal peoples, Langton believes that there is a disproportionate emphasis on narratives of conflict in Australian media. According to her, too frequently, filmmakers “edit in the ‘gub’ and ‘kadiya’ stories (centering violence and horror) and leave Aboriginal stories of good times with white people – the flotsam and jetsam of the working models – on the cutting room floor. These film-makers want to see ‘Europeans’ portrayed only as oppressors and all complexities eliminated” (Quoted in O’Regan, 1996:249). O’Regan notes that the converse of this is that in these narratives of white oppressors, Aboriginal people are represented only as victims (1996:249). Representations of Aboriginal people as victims do not accredit them with agency and do not encourage narratives of potential change in the social status quo. If media representations construct as well as reflect ‘reality’ it becomes all the more necessary for Australian media to represent narratives of Aboriginal social upliftment and integration if a multicultural vision of Australia is to succeed. But perhaps even more
be the integration of Aboriginal people’s own representations of themselves and their realities and the ways in which they would like to be seen into the dominant Australian mediasphere.

The ongoing representation by non-Aboriginal mediamakers of ‘authentic’, homogenous and/or essentialist ‘Aboriginal realities’ from non-Aboriginal perspectives, can be understood as a neo-colonial act of visual colonisation.

This genre of popular aesthetic discourse contributes to the idea that there is an abstracted, knowable thing called ‘Aboriginality’ in Australia; that it is a serious, negative social problem; and encourages film audiences to understand representations of indigenous Australians in this way. This is important. These are non-indigenous Australians claiming that they know what the ‘reality’ of Aboriginality is. (McKee, 1999b:149)

Racist representations of Australian Aboriginals

Although the high visibility of Australian Aboriginals, particularly in the 1980s, was largely due to representations in the news and ‘factual’ media that represented political claims and debates as well as social problems, Australian Aboriginals have also received increased visibility in narrative films. Their presence in narrative films before the late 1940s was not very dominant, but O'Regan reports that “in the contemporary period, Aborigines are being written back into the picture under pressure from Aboriginal and other activists” (1996:191).

The positions of Australian Aboriginals in narrative films are different from the role of victim of colonisation or socially depressed ‘problem’ in the social problem documentary genre and the news coverage discussed above. McKee observes that the representations of Australian Aboriginals in narrative films are dominated by representations of Aboriginals as fatal or as mystical. In terms of Meucke’s three trends of the Anthropological, Romantic and the Racist ways of representing Aboriginality in Australian cinema, the social problem documentary and news coverage of Aboriginal people as problematic would cut across Meucke’s categories. This coverage could be seen, in part, as anthropological but also either as racist or romantic, depending on whether the Aboriginal people are conceived of as victims or free agents in their social problem narratives. Fatal representations, as described by McKee, would fit into a racist category, whereas the mystical trend of representation is primarily a romanticisation of Aboriginal people although mysticism can also be a fetishistic projection of Aboriginal ‘black magic’, which would involve an essentialist, racist discourse. One popular trend in representing Aboriginality within a Racist discourse, is the common violence and/or fatality of Aboriginal characters, where “Aboriginal people kill (themselves or others) in many Australian films across the decades. Reciting even the best known films of the Aboriginal confirms this point” (McKee, 1997d:193).
Fetishistic representations of violent and barbaric Aboriginal people, hurting and killing other people can be understood in terms of the economy of the Manichean allegory as a projection of alterity and colonial guilt as well as the projected fear of the colonist for the Other and the new land, which Aboriginal people repeatedly represent. This kind of representation of Caliban-type figures fits into Said's standard commodity of violence and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's concept of 'excess'.

A good example of such a representation in Australian cinema is “the womancidal no-hoper as seen in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978). Perhaps this film was hailed as a sensitive portrayal of racial issues in Australia, but the image lingering on is that of a berserk boong hacking to death white ladies” (Johnson, 1987).

When Aboriginal people are not killing other people, they are frequently being killed off in colonial and neo-colonial narratives. This may represent a colonial fantasy of eliminating the ‘Aboriginal problem’, where Aboriginals are living reminders of the coloniser’s not-belongingness.

Jedda (1954) is perhaps the most acclaimed representation of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginal filmmakers in Australia, and yet it too arguably represents the trend of killing off Aboriginal characters. Marbuk, the Aboriginal male lead in Jedda, is, according to Colin Johnson (1987), “the only dignified Aboriginal male lead that has been allowed to exist in films made by white directors in Australia”. The notability of this example suggests the prevalence of negative or racist Aboriginal stereotypes in Australian cinema. Marbuk is, contrary to dominant representations, constructed as a proud and independent Aboriginal man, and as such his death in Jedda has been cause for much discussion. On the one hand it can be argued that “though Marbuk does die in the end, it is because he has offended tribal law rather than because of anything the whiteman has shot at him” (Johnson, 1987). But on the other hand, it can be claimed that

Marbuk as a black male is the threatening ‘other’. As such, he must be done away with for even in a film the Aboriginal male must not be seen to triumph. It is part of the ideological postulates of European Australia that the black man has had his day and must be seen either as tamed, or dead. In fact in the 1950s for an Aboriginal male not to accept that power had passed from him, was the attitude of a crazy man, and so in the latter part of the film Marbuk is made insane, or has it been implicit throughout the film? (Johnson, 1987)
The repeated and disproportionately consistent killing off of Aboriginal characters in Australian narrative films represents racist fantasies of alterity as well as vengeance against the threatening Aboriginal Other.

The racist trend of representing Aboriginality does not only involve violence, however, but also offers stereotypes of Aboriginal people as ‘no-hopers’ – lazy, incompetent, drunk, jokers, dependent on social welfare and so on. As an example, “The Fringedwellers perpetuates the stereotyping of Aborigines (especially male Aborigines) … the finished product in which the Aboriginal male found himself cast yet again as no-hoper, though a humorous one” (Johnson, 1987).

Finally, the frequent silence and marginality of Aboriginal characters in colonial and neo-colonial narratives is a racist practice that situates Aboriginal people as the objects of non-Aboriginal characters’ narratives. Aboriginals are not granted agency and control in the narratives and are consistently positioned as the Other in films and stories about the colonial Self’s interaction with the world and people around him (and sometimes her).

**Romantic representations – mystical and mythical representations of Australian Aboriginality**

The mystification of Aboriginal people is, for McKee, the flipside of the fatality coin. He identifies both the literal killing off of Aboriginal characters and the mystification of Aboriginals in film narratives as fatal for Aboriginal people. For McKee

the insistence on Aboriginality in Australia as an intensely spiritual quality – is as ‘fatal’ as the baby-killers of Lattas’ earlier representations. When Gillian Cowlishaw identifies as the ‘dominant images’ of the Aboriginal, ‘savages, noble or ignoble’ (Cowlishaw, 1988:87), the former is no less fatal than the latter – for the meaningfulness of the Aboriginal mystic is ‘fatal’ as much as is the murderous intent of the bloodthirsty native. Aboriginal spirituality in this model is ideal and transcendent, existing beyond the banal, humdrum existence of everyday (white) life: it is ‘the ancient spirituality which the West has lost’ (Lattas, 1990-91:284). (McKee, 1997a:194)

I have discussed the dangers of mystifying people in Chapter Two, that included a depoliticisation of Aboriginal people, which limits their access to power and agency within the real-life environment of contemporary society. Colin Johnson expands on this point to claim that by mystifying and mythologising Aboriginal people, they cease to function as human within colonial and neo-colonial narratives and instead occupy the space of symbols within these narratives – for example, a symbol of ‘the spirit of Australia’. Johnson reiterates the close
We had only to compare ... films such as The Fringedwellers (Beresford, 1986) and The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (Schepisi, 1978) to realise how lowly is the position of the Aboriginal male lead in Australian films, though in some others such as The Last Wave (Weir, 1977) or Storm Boy (Safran, 1976), mysticism replaces any depiction of the Aboriginal male, and he becomes chthonic - a natural earth force without humanity. (Johnson, 1987)

The mystical representation of Aboriginality in Australia is often articulated in terms of dreams and dream-like states. Dreamtime is a cultural understanding unique to Australian Aboriginals and this is articulated in terms of the understandings and cinematic traditions of the European settler Self to represent broad and generalised mystical states. According to McKee, Australian Aboriginals are very frequently represented as dreaming or as characters within the dreams of others. This trend in representation has little to do with the Aboriginal understanding of Dreamtime, however, but is rather a cinematic articulation of a Eurocentric concept of the term ‘dreaming’, “that process which occurs in the sleep, determined by the presence or lack of REM (Rapid Eye Movement). As an interviewee on the ABC’s Being Aboriginal commented, ‘I don’t think that our dreaming has much to do with sleeping dreams’” (McKee, 1997d:201). Bowden and Bunbury articulate this same point, claiming that, unlike Western understandings of dreaming as associated with sleeping, for them “it’s got nothing to do with that whatsoever. Dreaming is the tracks you are responsible for” (Quoted in McKee, 1995:13). And Hodge and Mishra offer the explanation that, “what is called ‘the Dreamtime’ by Aboriginalists ... is a time in the past whose values are still active in the present” (1995:415).

If these explanations are perhaps unclear to non-Aboriginal readers, what is clear is that Dreamtime has nothing to do with the way it has been perpetually represented in colonial and neo-colonial films as the dreams and nightmares of sleeping people. McKee explores the European Self’s fascination with this element of Aboriginal culture and the insistence of white filmmakers on representing Aboriginals as mythical and mystical and to articulate these qualities in terms of dreams. He understands this trend in representation as a process of othering as well as removing Aboriginal people from the realm of real-life, where “if the Aboriginal exists mystically in dreams, rather than against recognizable modern backgrounds, this somehow renders materialist critiques of historical atrocities or current depredations suffered by Aboriginal individuals irrelevant” (McKee, 1995:14).
In terms of dreams and dreaming is *The Last Wave*, which will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter. The tendency to represent Aboriginality in terms of mysticism and myth is also more evident in some film genres than in others, and is particularly prevalent in horror films, which is one category into which *The Last Wave* fits.

For now, suffice it to say that Aboriginals, not only in Australia, but aboriginal peoples worldwide, are represented in terms of mysticism and myth. Intuition, a close bond with land, the past and with the dead, and strange and bizarre capabilities are accredited to Aboriginal people.

**Appropriating Aboriginality and questions of authenticity**

“Terry Goldie discusses the difficulties white Australia has in defining itself as Australian in the face of indigenes who are living proof of the invalidity of this label. He suggests that, in such a situation, one possible strategy is a careful double-think, whereby white Australia acquires Aboriginality without actually ever becoming Aboriginal” (McKee, 1997d:206). This need to invent belongingness is explained in terms of white settlers’ post-colonial condition in Australia, where they themselves were previously subject to imperial domination by Britain and are subsequently re-imagining their ‘home’ and national identity as Australia and Australian. The newness of this identity and on-going connections to European culture, create tensions in this process of self-definition. As Goldie highlights, this is exacerbated by the obvious belongingness of Australian Aboriginals as the settler Self’s colonised Other. The incorporation of Aboriginals into the Australian national identity, characterised by multiculturalism, is in part an appropriation of the Australian Aboriginals’ belongingness. The insistence that multiculturalism involves ‘unity in diversity’, however, simultaneously retains the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The newness of the ‘Australian nation’ can, under a policy of multiculturalism, be disguised by adopting the long history of the Australian Aboriginals as the history of Australia as a whole. Australia can then be imagined as “a new nation in an old, old land. A sense of youth and beginning anew is paradoxically associated with an ancient landscape, a unique flora and fauna and, more lately, Aboriginal people and their heritage (as the world’s oldest peoples)” (O’Regan, 1996:209).

By adopting the Aboriginal history as the history of the Australian nation, Australian Aboriginals have, like the San in South Africa, become a symbol of the essence of Australia, the symbol of Australian-ness. As O’Regan points out, this has benefit for a new nation in the process of defining itself. “The primordial and primitive otherness of Aborigines is seen as capable of providing a form of spiritual unity for the nation, it can provide the necessary mythology capable of overcoming the fragmentation of the nation which immigration and multiculturalism have produced” (O’Regan, 1993:94).
That Australian Aboriginals have come to represent Australian-ness in general rather than distinct groups within a multicultural nation, is clear in the process of appropriation that settler Australians have undertaken, where settler Australians assume Aboriginality as part of their own cultural heritage as Australians. According to Meucke:

Non-Aboriginal Australians narrate themselves in relation to the Aboriginal Other in a number of ways. Aboriginal otherness is becoming increasingly central to debates about cultural identity in a country redefining its nationality with the Mabo/republicanism agenda. In fact, this centralisation may imply a merging of that familiar opposition self/other, for how can one be sure just what part of oneself is indubitably "self" and what part is definitely from another cultural place? For many Australians, Aboriginality is not another place, it is more or less home, through connections with the mythologies or realities of landscape, through popular cultural icons of Aboriginality, through an extended sense of Aboriginal history (before 1788), through celebrations of Aboriginal achievements, and through picking at a slowly healing moral wound. (1994)

I would argue, however, that contrary to Meucke’s thesis that the incorporation of Aboriginal elements into mainstream Australian culture elides the difference between Self and Other, settler and Aboriginal; Aboriginality is appropriated for mainstream Australian mythology and identity only as a symbol of Australia, a mythical essence, but actual Australian Aboriginals are nonetheless imagined as a distinct and essentially different group from the settler Self. On the one hand, the elision of Australian Aboriginals with Australian landscapes and unique and indigenous animals, suggests this point that Aboriginality is understood as a feature of the geography of Australia to which all Australians have access. On the other hand, the people to whom this characteristic of Aboriginality belongs are understood as a separate ‘social problem’ rather than the living embodiment of what is imagined as the essence of Australia.

“As Lattas observes (1990:66), in public mythology there is a tendency today to mix the bush with the first Australians – the Aborigines” (O’Regan, 1996:210). This is significant because “the landscape appears to provide a key to Australia’s identity, a preoccupation further underlined by the fact that these are the imaginings of one of the most urbanised of societies” (O’Regan, 1996:209). Following this logic, Aboriginality is a signifier of Australia as much as, for example, Ayers rock. Of course this elision of cultural characteristics of a large and generalised group of people with an ancient landscape, brings to mind the trend of representing Aboriginal people as prehistoric, as was discussed in Chapter Two. The concept of Australian Aboriginals being as distinctive and unchanging as ancient features of an ancient landscape, relies on an essentialist understanding of Aboriginality, and this in turn carries with it the burden of ‘authenticity’ for Aboriginal people, which is, according to McKee, as fatal a representation of Aboriginality as the bloody killing off of Aboriginal people in Australian cinematic narratives.
Mudrooroo comments on this trend of representing Australian Aboriginals as essentially prehistoric, claiming that

for better or worse, ninety-nine percent of Australian culture is of European derivation. Aboriginal culture (or cultures) alone is (are) indigenous and rooted in the soil. They, like every other culture on the globe, are subject to change and are changing constantly. I want to emphasise that such a thing as a stone-age culture (static and unchanging), is a myth created by those who should have known better and still put forth by those who should know better. All societies and cultures change and adapt, and this is fact not theory. The Indonesians were the first recorded visitors to Australia and aspects of their culture were taken in and adapted by the Aborigines of Arnhem land. Cultural traits from New Guinea were adapted by the Queensland Aborigines and perhaps this process was two-way. Cultural affinities between Papua New Guinea, Torres Strait and Cape York Peninsula do exist. The idea of Australia being separated from the rest of the world until the arrival of the Europeans is a myth put out by them, and sooner or later it must be laid to rest. (1995:228)

This myth of a prehistoric Aboriginal presence existing in Australia before European settler invasion, supports early pioneer legends of European settlers who were the first to ‘conquer’ the land. The changing political discourses in contemporary Australia, however, have affected a change in the way in which Australian Aboriginals’ history is imagined, and in turn how Australian history in general is represented.

Environmentalist discourses have also impacted on the ways in which colonial development has been represented, where environmentalists have looked to the ways in which Australian Aboriginal communities have in the past lived with nature, rather than in opposition to it. By drawing comparisons between how ‘they’ took care of the land and how ‘we’ did not, settler representations of Australian Aboriginals as the first conservationists, although positive representations, impose limits on the definitions of authentic Aboriginals and assume homogeneity, or at least disguise the hybridity, of the enormously diverse Aboriginal population of Australia.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, the celebration of stereotypical aspects of ‘authentic’ Aboriginals can result in some empowering circumstances where Aboriginal individuals can capitalise on the interest in Aboriginality and use it to their own ends, but the discourse of essentialism and ‘authenticity’ is ultimately a crippling one for individuals who do not cohere to stereotypical definitions of Australian Aboriginals. This celebration of Aboriginals as deeply connected to the land results in a situation where “the ‘real outback Aborigines’ assume the idealised and romantic status of an unchanging, authentic past, whilst those Aborigines who have moved into European lifestyles are seen to have developed into inferior and less authentic selves” (Lattas, 1990-1991:284). This dilemma of ‘authenticity’ also has political implications for Aboriginal people. This is reflected by Griffiths’ comments on the dilemmas that arise for minority and particularly indigenous groups in a
First People and lay claim to special rights on the basis of their Aboriginality and distinct history as victims of colonial oppression. He notes that

Australian Aboriginal peoples may increasingly wish to assert their sense of the local and the specific as a recuperative strategy in the face of the erasure of difference characteristic of colonialis representation. But such representations subsumed by the white media under a mythologised and fetishised sign of the ‘authentic’ can also be used to create a privileged hierarchy of Australian Aboriginal voice which in practice represents that community as divided. More subtly, it may construct a belief in the society at large that issues of recovered ‘traditional’ rights are of a different order of equity from the right to general social justice and equality. Whilst this may be in part the unintentional product of a worthy liberal desire to recuperate Australian Aboriginal culture, it also frequently results, as in the case I have given, in a media construction of the ‘inauthentic’ political activist whose claim is undermined (the metaphor is an appropriate one) by a dismissal of their right to represent Australian Aboriginal culture in any legitimate way. (1995:238)

The “mythologised and fetishised sign of the ‘authentic’” Aboriginal as a ‘bush-type’, mystical, prehistoric kind of individual, is matched in popular Australian media by the representations of ‘inauthentic’ Aboriginals as urban no-hopers or ‘social problems’, as discussed earlier. The irony of this is that there appear to be key ‘authentic’ ways in which the ‘inauthentic’ Aboriginal is represented in Australian media. McKee presents an interesting study of the way in which ‘realism’ as a media genre has cast Australian Aboriginals in representations that are ‘realistic’ not so much to a pro-filic ‘reality’ but to the mediamakers’ own concepts of Aboriginal ‘reality’ as a ‘social problem’.

McKee reports that Colin McKinnon of the Aboriginal Actor’s Corporation states he “would like to see more Aboriginal actors case in major roles as doctors, dentists or police officers. That’s the true picture of Australia” (McKee, 1999b:143). McKee asserts, however, that film reviewers and dominant Australian audiences in fact find such mundane representations of Aboriginals unrealistic. Instead, the representations of “miserable battlers, petty crimes, boozers, unemployed drifters” (McKee, 1999b:143) are understood as ‘truly’ representative. McKee goes on to comment that

any Aboriginal identities which might partake in these banal elements have been consistently devalued in Australia – by means of ideas of ‘inauthenticity’. This term is mobilised in order to render Aboriginality and banality incommensurable. Such a process involves not only showing Aboriginals in exotic, dangerous and Othered ways, but also simultaneously making clear that this is the only correct way in which the Aboriginal can be represented. There seems to be little possibility of an Aboriginal identity which is urban; which is middle class; which exhibits some features of white culture – and yet remains recognizably Aboriginal. (1997:198)

McKee asserts that representations of middle-class Aboriginals are in fact not representative of the majority of Australian Aboriginal people, but he goes on to make the important point that cinema need not represent
do not simply reflect populations in statistically-accurate ways” (1999:151). He argues that, for example, the representation of ‘traditional’ Aboriginals is disproportionately high compared with the pro-filmic proportion of Aboriginals in Australia who live ‘traditional’ lifestyles. It is then, in McKee’s opinion, “disingenuous to use this argument to argue against showing these images [mundane images] of Aboriginal people” (1999:151).

The limited ways in which Australian Aboriginality is represented does not then reflect a pro-filmic ‘reality’ but rather reflects a Manichean opposition, where the settler Self must maintain the imaginary divide between Self and Other by casting Aboriginals as either prehistoric mystics (‘authentic’) or criminal no-hopers on the margins of society (‘inauthentic’) - as noble or degraded savages.

**Signifiers of Aboriginality**

Whether Australian Aboriginals are imagined in terms of anthropological, romantic or racist discourses, the physical signifiers of Aboriginality have remained fairly constant across the board in Australian media representations of Aboriginals.

As Robert Miles makes clear in his history of racism, it has historically proved useful for racist projects to identify groups in visible ways. If ‘us’ and ‘them’ are visually distinct, it is much simpler to tell who is included in any given community – and who, in turn, is excluded. This visibility is necessary for protection, reassurance and in order to naturalise discourses of inequality. Skin colour is the perfect marker – physical and inescapable, it is a permanent mark of difference. (McKee, 1997b:166)

McKee draws the conclusion that black skin is the primary signifier of Aboriginality, through his study of a number of Australian films that feature Aboriginal characters. He cites the examples of Robert Tudawali (*Jedda*), David Gulpilil (*Walkabout* [Roeg, 1970]), *Storm Boy* [Safran, 1976] *The Last Wave* [Weir, 1977]) and David Ngoombujarra (*Blackfellas* [Ricketson, 1993]), all of whom have features that typically denote Aboriginality – most strikingly -dark skins. McKee then makes the claim that in Australian cinema, “Aboriginality equals dark skin; and (although examples such as John Duigan’s *Flirting* (1989) prevent the reversal from being too neat), dark skin equals Aboriginality. Such a history has implications for wider Australian understandings of just what Aboriginality is” (1997:165-166).

But if ‘Aboriginality equals dark skin’ in the dominant Australian imagination, this has implications for Aboriginals who do not fit into this dark-skinned Aboriginal stereotype. “As an Aboriginal man from Adelaide says to Jerry Schwab, ‘It’s easier being black if you’re black’. Suggested in this striking comment are the
exclusions implied, and the parameters of authenticity suggested, by the equation of Aboriginality and skin colour” (McKee, 1997b:168).

McKee goes on to point out the link between ideas of ‘authenticity’ and essentialism, the pitfalls of which have been expounded in greater detail in Chapter Two. He explains that to suggest that authentic Aboriginals are black Aboriginals is to suggest that Aboriginal identity is a matter of biological determinism rather than cultural affiliation, which is the basis of essentialism.

**Australian Aboriginal control over representations of Aboriginality in Australian media**

Unlike in South Africa, the issue of Australian Aboriginal control over representations of Aboriginality in the media has been, and continues to be addressed.

In 1991, as part of the then Labour Government's recognition of the importance of symbolic politics, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was founded on the invitation of Australian parliament’s challenge to establish a process of reconciliation. This council consisted of delegates from various cultural groups and political parties who united to find ways in which to redress the wrongs of the past that were inflicted upon Aboriginal peoples (Dodson quoted in McKee, 1999b:192). The focus on reconciliation, as was reflected by the formation of this council, and the Australian governmental policy of multiculturalism extended to considerations of media access and control and saw a great surge in Aboriginal media output.

Before the late 1970s, Aboriginal medi makers had very little control over representations of Aboriginality, and programmes were not in place to empower Aboriginal people to gain greater access to the media. Commenting in 1993, however, O'Regan notes that “now, film and television, together with their cultural counterparts in painting, ritual performance, radio, music and theatre, occupy a key place in indigenous self-affirmation and political development” (O'Regan, 1993:170).

Nyoongah comments on the history of dominance of representations of Aboriginality in Australian media that are authored by European settler medi makers, and the impact that has on the nature of Aboriginal identities, claiming that

what happened in the film industry is that every major director has done their film on blacks. Of course, they are all white ... I don't think at any point any of those films have advanced the cause of the Aboriginal people. I think mostly what they have done is reinforced what white Australians think about us. Low life. It's negative images, reinforcing negative images all the time in the minds of the children about what Aboriginal people are. (Johnson, 1987)
Criticism of the representations of Aboriginals and other minority groups in Australia as Other, became increasingly prevalent in the light of the now dominant discourses of reconciliation and multicultural Australia. This criticism and activism gave rise to proposals for a more interactive brand of filmmaking between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. “Stephen Meucke (1992) calls for a ‘respectful appropriation’ by white and black Australians of each other’s culture – the evidence for which is to be found in front of and behind the camera” (O’Regan, 1996:22-23).

In recognition of the danger of the monopoly of Australian media being controlled by white European settler men who construct media representations of marginal Others in terms of their understandings of them, and in response to mounting pressure for a “respectful dialogue” between cultures in the representation of one culture by another, the 1990s saw greater attention being paid to the integration of marginal groups into mainstream Australian media. This was done by implementing affirmative action programmes in government-funded cultural organisations, including the two national broadcasters. Commercial media making institutions were also lobbied to offer greater on and off-screen representation of minority groups. Furthermore, “funding became earmarked for identifiable multicultural projects” (O’Regan, 1998b:13) and Aboriginal, Wal Saunders was employed as an officer for the Australian Film Commission. This appointment saw Marcia Langton commissioned in 1993 “to produce a landmark report on film-makers’ relations with indigenous peoples – ‘Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television’” (O’Regan, 1996:177).

Marcia Langton argues that Aboriginal involvement in representations of Australian Aboriginality is important, not only to redefine the ways in which settler Australians understand Aboriginality, but also to redefine the ways in which Aboriginals understand and define themselves. She asserts that Aboriginal people object to stories about Aboriginality which they do not at least help to create, because representations of Aboriginality “provide the wider community with ways of ‘knowing Aborigines’” (O’Regan, 1996:277) and in the past Aboriginals have been dominantly represented in terms of how they are meaningful to non-Aboriginals instead of how they are meaningful to themselves. This is true to the extent that, according to Langton, “Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists” (Langton quoted in O’Regan, 1996:277). It is in the light of this tradition in the representation of Aboriginality, that Aboriginal demands for complete control over media representations of aboriginality have been given credence. Of course, “to demand complete control of all representation, as some Aboriginals naively do, is to demand censorship, to deny the communication that none of us can prevent” (Langton quoted in O’Regan, 1996:227-228) Instead, Langton suggests that “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal might together forge ‘intersubjective’ spaces” (Quoted in O’Regan, 1996:278).
The possibility of creating ‘intersubjective’ representations of Aboriginality is attested to by the examples of collaborative media efforts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, particularly in the production of documentary films, “with titles like Takeover (MacDougall and MacDougall 1980), Two Laws (Cavadini and Strachan 1981), How the West was Lost (Noakes 1987) and Exile and the Kingdom (Rijavek 1994)” (O’Regan, 1996:23).

Integrating Aboriginal interests in mainstream Australian media and media policies, is a political issue (O’Regan, 1992). Greater access and control over the media is empowering to Aboriginal people and central to redefining Aboriginal identities in more positive ways and hence renegotiating an Aboriginal place in the grand narratives of the multicultural Australian nation. Aboriginals increasingly demanded greater control over representations of Aboriginality in mainstream media.

Aboriginal political priorities here included: concern for adequate Aboriginal depiction; the existence of appropriate mechanisms and financial benefits to Aborigines stemming from the production of programming using Aboriginal people, images, designs, stories and Aboriginal political viewpoints; and concern for greater Aboriginal involvement in film and television program production. The depiction issue is a concern for on-screen protocols to do with the representation of Aboriginal subjects, issues and designs. These constitute a political demand for an Aboriginal say in the character, dimension and structure of information about them, their society and its organisation. This also extends to demands for a greater variety of fictional roles and alternatives to the ‘tradition of the victim’ in fiction and documentary ... These contemporary political contestations see Aboriginal rights and priorities negotiated by Aborigines and television institutions find ways of accommodating the Aboriginal presence. (O’Regan, 1992:178-179)

There are practical examples of Aboriginal control over media representations, where mediamakers must work within the ‘intersubjective spaces’ between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal systems and lifeways. Kelly discusses the necessity of filmmakers’ accommodation of and adherence to Aboriginal law in filmmaking practices that involve Aboriginal subjects, issues and lands, where recognition must be given to two laws – the ‘European’ (Australian national) law and Aboriginal law. According to him, non-Aboriginal filmmakers filming in his community are contractually obliged to obey the Aboriginal laws and regulations which are explained to non-Aboriginal filmmakers by the local Aboriginal media board. Non-Aboriginal filmmakers are also required to pay a levy to enter the community and must show the film to the community media board before its release. The media board then have the authority to censor images where necessary. (Kelly quoted in Cohen, 1993).

Sydney based Aboriginal film and television producer, Lester Bostock suggests, in an article titled The Greater Perspective: A guideline for the production of film and television on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, some further ways in which ‘intersubjective spaces’ can be forged between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
mediamakers. Some of these ways include a recommendation that non-Aboriginal mediamakers challenge their own prejudices and preconceived notions regarding Aboriginality, and that preference be given to Aboriginal viewpoints over non-Aboriginal opinions on Aboriginal concerns. Bostock also encourages non-Aboriginal mediamakers who produce representations of Aboriginal subjects, to work in consultation with Aboriginal peoples and especially the subject peoples themselves. Furthermore, “dealings with the subjects of programs should be conducted with honesty and the subjects should be fully informed of the consequences of any proposed agreement” (Cohen, 1993). And finally, Bostock makes the obvious recommendation that no damage should be done to Aboriginal people or property during the making of films about Aboriginality.

Like Crawford’s guidelines, Bostock’s text deals primarily with the dilemma of representing Aboriginality in documentaries and media genres that seek to reveal ‘truth’. The broader Australian media policies, however, consider the practice of representation in all forms of media, and negotiate guidelines for the representation of Aboriginal people in narrative as well as non-narrative genres. National television policies illustrate the contemporary concern for representing Aboriginality in more balanced and less exploitative ways, corresponding to national narratives of multiculturalism.

The multiculturalist challenge for mainstream Australian television is multifaceted. At a policy level it argues for adequate representation in terms of:

- mainstream reporting of ethnic issues generally;
- well-defined news protocols alive to cultural difference and pluralism and guarding against furthering stereotypes and giving offence to particular communities;
- an ethnic presence in Australian television drama protocols in terms of greater kinds of ethnic specific presence in storytelling, normalisation of ethnicity into non-ethnic specific roles and non-stereotyped representation of ethnic groups;
- an ethnic advertising presence in advertisements and non-stereotypical ways of covering ethnicity in advertising;
- legislative intervention and educational campaigns to implement these multicultural policies in television organisations and production practices (O'Regan, 1993:109-110)

The aim to achieve greater cultural diversity in both the representations within and the control of Australian media resulted not only in policy decisions such as the multicultural television policy described above, but also in community media projects that were funded at the expense of national broadcasters.

In terms of a postcolonial rewriting of colonial history and Aboriginal identity within Australia - not as Other but as Self - Aboriginal community television stations are extremely valuable, as is the increased Aboriginal access to mainstream Australian media.
The development or invention of Aboriginal media conveys within it the expression of contestation: the land and land rights, freedom of expression, and human rights. In these claims, nothing is stronger than the right to self-determination and its links to the demand that Aboriginal people should control the ways in which they are represented. Recently, for the most part, it means the control over the production and circulation of images. It implies that the practice of audio-visual media be closely aligned to a politics of representation. (Cohen, 1993)

These community media channel developments are “enabling Aborigines to select and transform their culture, items and practices on their terms”, and will “not only transform Aboriginal politics, culture and society over the next decade but will also transform the settler culture’s understanding of and relationship with Aborigines” (O'Regan, 1993:184).

The post-1989 attempts to forge a multicultural Australia and the renegotiation of Australian Aboriginals’ places in the imagined Australian nation, have resulted in some very positive moves towards empowering Australian Aboriginals through greater Aboriginal access to both mainstream media and distinct ‘Aboriginal’ media such as community television stations. The process of redefining Aboriginals in Australia in terms of Aboriginal understandings of themselves (that is as Self rather than as Other) is an on-going process that seeks to reverse the effects of decades of Aboriginal stereotypes created by colonial and neo-colonial mediamakers. Compared to the representation of San peoples in South African media, Australia has come a long way towards building a media tradition of representing Aboriginal people as ‘people like other people’ and yet media projections of Australian Aboriginals as the essential Other continue to be generated alongside more politically correct representations in contemporary Australian media.

An Analysis of The Last Wave

*The Last Wave*, directed by Peter Weir was produced in 1977, prior to the media and media policy developments of the nineties that have been the primary focus of my discussion above. It is a film that is interesting and relevant to this dissertation not so much in that it is representative of contemporary constructions of Aboriginality in Australian cinema, but because it clearly reflects some of the key trends of colonial and neo-colonial representations of Aboriginality and offers a cinematic depiction/construction of the desires and anxieties of the settler Self in post-colonial Australia. This film, as a narrative film, suggests more about the neuroses of the filmmakers and the political unconscious to which they belong than about the Aboriginal people and culture it represents. Most interesting in this film is its narrative of ‘becoming the Other’ where the central (settler) character undergoes a process of ‘indigenisation’ by appropriating a place in a primarily Australian Aboriginal cultural realm, hence claiming an imagined essence of ‘aboriginality’ without
ever destabilising the divide between Self and Other. Read in conjunction with The Great Dance, a post-colonial, settler preoccupation with constructing national narratives that involve Aboriginal people as the 'spirit of the nation', becomes clear.

David, the central character in The Last Wave, takes audiences on his journey of discovery. Clear dilemmas or troubling questions are established in the film that are typical of a settler post-colonial crisis: Post-industrial angst about ‘man’s’ disconnection from nature and a spiritual reality, post-colonial anxiety about cultural identities and questions of belonging, and a settler sense of newness and disconnectedness with one’s past. David’s narrative and psychological journey in The Last Wave cinematically explores these anxieties and their related desires. In some cases these anxieties are resolved, and in other instances the horror of these dilemmas are dramatised. The final moment of the film, where a giant tidal wave is seen building up to presumably wipe out settler culture and post-industrial civilisation is an example of the dramatisation of settler anxieties where the stresses of the settler post-colonial condition are projected as hopelessly irresolvable, short of an apocalyptic event and a whole new beginning.

In this chapter, I will investigate the ways in which the settler post-colonial anxieties and desires are projected in The Last Wave, with particular attention to the use of Aboriginality and the negotiation of Self/Other identities in the film’s narrative.

A brief synopsis

The Last Wave tells the story of a white, settler man whose life is disrupted by his chance interaction with a group of urban Aboriginals who he is asked to represent in a criminal law case in which the Aboriginals are accused of murdering Billy, another Aboriginal man. The case appears on face value to be an open-and-shut case of manslaughter in a drunken brawl, but David’s premonitory dreams cue him to investigate the case more closely. David’s accounts of his premonitions and the unusual weather phenomena that concurrently occur, in turn engender interest from the accused Aboriginals, in David.

A number of scenes then follow in which David questions the Aboriginals (and especially Chris), and Chris and Charlie (a spirit from the Dreamtime who manifests himself in human form) question David. These reciprocal
investigations involve explorations of each other's cultural identities and heritage. David's dreams lead Charlie to the belief that David is a mulkrul (a descendant of an early South American settler tribe) who is prophesying the apocalyptic end of a natural cycle. David's questioning of the Aboriginals and their cultural understandings and ways of making sense of reality, in turn leads him on a journey of self-discovery, which leads him further and further away from his family and friends and the mundane existence of settler culture, and closer to an understanding of a realm of mystical reality to which the Aboriginal characters have privileged access.

David ultimately discovers his identity as mulkrul when Chris leads him to a sacred Aboriginal site in which mulkrul artefacts are housed and where stories of the mulkrul tribe are told through pictures on the cave wall. By taking David there, however, Chris disobeys tribal law and must die, as Billy died early in the film for similarly transgressing Aboriginal law when he trespassed on sacred Aboriginal sites and stole cultural artefacts from Chris' Aboriginal tribe in an attempt to become a member of that tribe.

Having discovered his cultural identity as a mulkrul descendant and prophet, David makes sense of his premonitory dreams of water and unnatural weather occurrences and goes onto the beach where an enormous tidal wave is seen building up to wipe out civilisation.

**The Last Wave as a genre film**

In his study of genre, and particularly the genre of horror films, McKee notes that a film’s meaning is limited and to an extent determined by the audience’s understanding of what genre the film fits into and the conventions of that genre. *The Last Wave* has been a particularly contested film in terms of its generic home. McKee notes that it has been categorised as an Australian film both because it was produced in Australia by an Australian auteur director and also because it carries numerous signifiers of Australian-ness, such as Aboriginal characters, Australian accents and recognisable places. It can also be defined as a Peter Weir film in the light of Weir’s other work and has “the kind of climate of wrongness, mystery and menace...which Weir has been developing ever since *Homesdale*‘ (PP McGuinness in the *National Times*: quoted in Stratton, 1980: 78)” (McKee, 1995:3) Furthermore, its “disjointed narrative and focus on characters, excessive concern with shot construction, and so on” (McKee, 1995:4) suggests that it be generically understood as an art movie, while its atmosphere of strangeness could imply that it is a mystery film or, as McKee reads it, a horror film. “In short, *The Last Wave* neatly illustrates the reductive nature of attempts to fit a film into a given generic category. It can certainly be read in all of the above ways, invoking for each perceived generic affiliation a
McKee’s comments successfully point out the multiplicity of film readings that are possible of any one film. He notes that a film can be understood according to the conventions of a number of genres. It is my understanding, however, that the cinematic clues contained within a film suggest some genres over others. Although it is reductive to assume that a film like *The Last Wave* fits neatly into one genre, it certainly does not fit into all genres, and limits, albeit broad limits, are placed on the generic reading of the film. For example, although *The Last Wave* can be read as a mystery, horror, Australian and art film, it would be extraordinary to claim that this film is a romantic comedy or an action film. The obvious thematic focus on matters supernatural in *The Last Wave* points audiences towards understandings of the film in terms of a certain limited number of genres. The atmosphere of strange-ness or the paranormal that is both thematically and stylistically engendered in this film suggests that it is perhaps a mystery/horror/thriller/suspense film, where these genres cross-over and intersect in their tendency to create cinematic atmospheres of un-naturalness and un-normalness.

Film audiences, with their own experience of reading genre films and art films, are able to construct complex readings of films in terms of a variety of genre conventions that frequently intersect. The nuances of the enormous variety of narrative films operate both within and across genre conventions, and by using typical cinematic signifiers filmmakers can use genre conventions to establish and fulfil or debunk audience expectations. Although genre conventions do limit audience readings of a film, there is still a lot of room for multiple and even contradictory film readings of conventional signs used in any one film. Where a film such as *The Last Wave* defies easy categorisation by employing generic devices from a range of film genres, audience expectations are less clearly defined and film readings are, as a result, less stable. The fewer clues that are given and/or the more vague the clues are as to how an audience should read a film, the broader the potential range of readings and interpretations will be. It is nonetheless valuable to identify genre conventions that are employed in the film and the expectations that they ‘conventionally’ engender in audiences.

Firstly, as an Australian film in 1977, *The Last Wave* would have been dominantly understood by local audiences in Australia as fitting into the ‘quality film’ category that enjoyed governmental support in the late 1970s in Australia’s attempt to build a national cinema (O'Regan, 1998a). This period produced a number of Australian auteur films/ art films. Besides suggesting the film’s probable style as self-consciously ‘artistic’, as an Australian film, audiences would likely have expected the film to reveal something about Australian-ness,
reveal an Australian settler post-colonial dilemma or angst, that I have selected *The Last Wave* for study in this chapter.

Categorised as a Peter Weir art movie, audiences may have expected a particular visual style of *The Last Wave*, but more particularly, a thematic interest in ‘things bizarre’, which Weir’s previous films *The Cars that Ate Paris* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* established. Against this background, the bizarre nature of the Aboriginality represented in *The Last Wave* can be understood in terms of its narrative function rather than as informative of a ‘truth’ about Aboriginal people. As an art movie, this film can be further understood as a personal journey of a single character. Generically less plot than character driven, the label of ‘art movie’ can generate audience readings, for example, that understand the unnatural events in the film such as the plague of frogs, bizarre weather patterns and so on, are symbolic of David’s psychological state rather than literal events. The genre of art movie does, however, ask audiences to be more reflective of the film’s narrative and symbolism, and art movies are frequently of a more serious intent in their social commentary.

Finally, McKee’s analysis of *The Last Wave* in terms of horror genre conventions notes the thematic concern in horror movies of ‘becoming’ or crossing boundaries “such as alive/dead (zombies), human/machine (cyborgs) and, particularly, human/animal (werewolves; *The Reptile* [John Gilling, 1966]; *The Fly* [David Cronenberg, 1986]) signal monstrosity” (McKee, 1995:9).

Where Aboriginals are framed in horror films as the dangerous Other, they are understood as something other than human (for example, a bridge between animal and human) and something that the settler Self can ‘become’ (McKee, 1995). This tendency is employed in *The Last Wave* where Aboriginals are represented as visions in dreams as well as, quite literally, as non-human creatures (where Charlie appears as an owl and is understood to exist outside of the temporal reality of the film’s context, in Dreamtime). Contrary to the conventions of art movie, however, horror films are plot driven and involve literal happenings and becomings rather than psychological journeys and symbolic or internal changes in condition.

Operating at the intersection of the horror and art movie genre, and vague in its meaning due to the disjointed narratives and repeated use of dreams and dream-like states which the audience must interpret as either ‘real’ or psychological happenings, *The Last Wave*’s narrative is ambiguous as representing either David’s psychological journey or the story of the premonitions and eventual occurrence of an apocalyptic ‘natural’ disaster in Australia. Once more removed, the ambiguity of the film’s narrative, like all narratives, can be read as the narrative of the individual filmmaker’s desires and anxieties or those of an entire population of settler Australians existing in a post-colonial condition.
My analysis of *The Last Wave*, mindful of the ways in which conventional signs are used to establish audience expectations and to frame meanings within generically conventional contexts, is focused on the ways in which settler anxieties are resolved or projected through the representation of Aboriginality in the film's narrative. As a story of paranormal experiences, premonitions, natural disasters, dreams and symbols intersecting with the narrative of an investigation into Aboriginal characters accused of killing an Aboriginal man for breaching Aboriginal law, *The Last Wave* is a fascinating exploration of settler discourses relating to Australian Aboriginals.

**Post-colonial anxieties played out in *The Last Wave***

Peter Weir, acknowledges that films form part of the mythology of a people or a nation and that they are therefore very valuable to settler cultures who have lost a sense of their identities, culture and history. Weir believes that films and filmmakers reveal something of a ‘truth’ or understanding that already exists, but that they simultaneously construct understandings and build the mythologies on which peoples’ and societies’ belief systems are based (Weir interviewed by Kass, 1979). The anxieties of a settler post-colonial condition, as discussed earlier in this section, are therefore of interest to Weir and he consciously discusses these anxieties in interviews about *The Last Wave* and what influenced his making of it.

Peter Weir, in an interview with Pat McGilligan, comments on his own discomfort with his displacement as a settler Australian and his unease with what it means to be Australian: “I, with a basically Scottish-Irish-English background, have lost my past. I have no past. I have no past. I'm nobody. I ask my parents who these people are in the photograph album and they can't remember. Nobody knows. I have no culture. I'm a European who lives in Australia. I'm an Australian in a sense, but I've lost something” (undated).

Weir understands that his sense of loss (of history, roots and identity) is not specific to him as an individual, but that it is typical of the post-colonial anxieties of settler Australians, where

> It's really a trauma that the country's still going through, this dislocation from Europe, with a complete severing of roots. There's no real consciousness of where you came from. And that's an interesting experiment, to take people and chop off their roots and put them down in Asia, and, not only that, but in a country that was inhabited ... with aborigines ... So I guess these things have been reflected in my films. (Weir interviewed by McGilligan, undated)
In this comment, Weir expands on the complexity of the post-colonial settler dilemma, where settlers are not only removed from their own ‘roots’ but are trying to imagine themselves as belonging in a country that already has its own history and people with distinct cultural identities who unarguably ‘belong’ there. The existence of Aboriginal people in Australia prior to settler invasion is a reminder of the settler peoples’ not-belongingness and their lack of roots. The post-colonial crisis of settler Australians is thus exacerbated by the presence of Aboriginals, and this is reflected in The Last Wave.

In this film, settler anxieties about a sense of loss, as Weir has commented on, are explored and problematised by the presence of Aboriginal characters in the film. The Aboriginal presence in The Last Wave is an unavoidable reminder of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ for settlers who wish to define themselves and reinvent the myths of an Australian nation at the expense of Aboriginal people and their claims to belonging and centrality in Australia. ‘Aboriginality’ plays a complex role in The Last Wave, where Aboriginal issues such as land rights, the conflict between Aboriginal law and ‘Australian’ law and issues of authenticity of urban Aboriginals are at times sympathetically represented, and yet an appropriation of Aboriginal spaces takes place within the film’s narrative. This complex and yet highly visible role of ‘Aboriginality’ in The Last Wave attests to Weir’s understanding of Australia’s ‘guilty history’ and can be understood as a projection of guilt as well as an anxiety to forge a new Australian cultural identity, which is a project that cannot avoid the ‘Aboriginal problem’.

Weir comments on this nation-building project of myth creation in the light of settler colonisation and neo-colonialism, asserting that

"Australia was built on a series of failures, horrible experiments, and the results of those experiments are still in progress. In recent years there's been quite an accelerated attempt - artificial, almost - to create the Australian character in a hothouse and to get it blooming, so that we can say, "Look, we've got an identity". But that's a very recent acceleration as a result of advances in the media. (Weir interviewed by McGilligan, undated)"

Speaking retrospectively, Weir comments here on the media drives within the post 1989 multicultural tradition, discussed earlier in this chapter. The Last Wave in 1977, however, was not a consciously multicultural attempt to integrate Australian society, but is rather a projection of the unresolved dilemma of settler Australians to find legitimate identities and a sense of belonging. This identity crisis is played out in the film’s narrative by David, the lead character with whom audiences are asked to identify. As Routt explains, “who David is is the big question in The Last Wave. On the surface it is an easy question to answer: David is an Australian. … David is
David is played by Peter Chamberlain (an American) and is a settler in Australia who was born in South America. Routt notes that this casting choice, itself, suggests the complexity of the project of self-definition for settler Australians and implies something of the identity crisis facing settler people in Australia, where David is an American pretending to be a South American, living in Australia and in his dreams, representing mulkrun spirits from Dreamtime. Despite this complex cultural identity, however, like many settler Australians, David does not immediately acknowledge that he is disconnected from his cultural heritage in a foreign land. His alienation from his South American roots is established early in the film when a Hispanic man offers him a yellow pepper and we discover that David cannot speak Spanish and has never seen a yellow pepper before. His relationship with the Hispanic (and presumably South American) man suggests no cultural connection or commonality. Instead, David at first identifies himself with white settler Australians who look and sound ‘Australian’.

At the beginning of the film he lives a happy suburban life, has very little interface with Aboriginal people, and exhibits a comfortable sense of entitlement. His understanding of Aboriginal people is two-fold: prehistoric-type ‘tribal’ people who live in rural areas in the Australian outback, and urban Aboriginals who are a ‘social problem’, people on the margins of society, people for whom he feels sympathy and who he ‘helps out’ by doing some pro bono work by representing Aboriginal people in court. This attitude is reflective of a broader settler sense of people being either cultural (in the sense that you are connected to your cultural ‘roots’) or urban, modern and disconnected from the past and cultural heritage. This imagined duality is depicted in the film when “our attention is drawn to a book with facing illustrations of Aboriginal men. On the left is one looking noble, dressed traditionally. On the right is one slumped down on a city street, dressed in contemporary white man’s clothes. Above the pictures are the words ‘THEN...AND NOW’” (Routt,1994).

Besides its implications for an essentialist discourse of Aboriginal authenticity, this understanding that one is either rural and connected to one’s past or urban and disconnected from history generates a sense of the ‘newness’ of an urban post-industrial reality in a post-colonial nation. ‘Newness’ disguises the disconnectedness of settler peoples’ identities and ignores the historical events that highlight the settlers’ role in colonisation and the on-going neo-colonisation of Australia and Australian Aboriginals. Mudrooroo comments on this settler disavowal of history, claiming that “unfortunately many white settlers in Australia … believe that
The disavowal of history and disowning of cultural identities and the dawning realisation of the importance of ‘roots’ are key thematic elements of *The Last Wave*, in which David undergoes a journey of discovery to realise his own identity, and it is the Aboriginal characters who lead him on this journey. Central to David’s journey is his discovery of lost mysteries that he uncovers in a spiritual realm and an episteme that is tied up in an Australian Aboriginal concept of Dreamtime. It is this mythology and spirituality that Weir believes is the great loss of settler people and it is this which is the Holy Grail to be achieved in David’s narrative journey in *The Last Wave*.

The role of Aboriginality in this journey is very interesting, where David appropriates Aboriginal spaces (both literal and psychological/spiritual spaces) in the film in order to reclaim his lost cultural identity, mystery, spirituality and so on. In the process of reclaiming this, he transgresses Aboriginal law by (among other incidents) trespassing in sacred Aboriginal sites. In this way he appropriates literal spaces that belong to Australian Aboriginals in the film. David’s privileged access to Dreamtime in the film, however, is less problematised within the film narrative, where David is represented as a legitimate heir to this spiritual realm. These appropriations of Aboriginal ‘spaces’ can be understood as a kind of narrative colonisation or an act of ‘indigenisation’, where, in some way, David ‘becomes aboriginal’ (mulkrul) through his access to the Dreamtime as well as to the Aboriginal sacred sites, artefacts and secrets.

**Appropriating Aboriginal mysticism – the colonisation of Dreamtime**

David's narrative, as the principal narrative in *The Last Wave*, is at first set up parallel to that of the Aboriginal group of men who kill Billy (an Aboriginal man who transgresses Aboriginal law by stealing artifacts from a sacred site). David’s life is mundane and suburban and it is in contrast to this ordinary life that the mystical or spiritual realities revealed in the film are established. This ‘Other’ side of reality is strongly associated with Aboriginality. His journey towards discovering his identity (cultural identity) is undertaken by his abandoning the complacent settler culture of ‘everyday life’ that is represented in the film, for a mysterious, spiritual world of dreams and symbols and natural disasters that is represented as the ‘Aboriginal reality’.
It is significant that David’s first narrative intersection with ‘Aboriginality’ occurs in a dream where he sees a silhouette of a man who is later revealed as Chris, the man who will ultimately lead David to the place where his cultural identity will be confirmed. The representation of Aboriginality within the narrative space of dreams and dreaming suggests a stereotypical understanding of Aboriginal culture as existing in dreams or a paranormal spiritual space (as understood by Westerners) and is a key conventional way in which Aboriginality has been represented in Australian cinema and throughout Western popular imagination. This imagined status of Aboriginals as spiritual beings, living in harmony with nature and a spiritual realm, can be understood as a projection of the myth of ‘Innocence before the Fall’, as discussed in Chapter Two, in which the angst experienced by many people living in post-industrial society is represented by projecting desires for an imagined earlier state of bliss and oneness with nature and a spiritual realm. This angst and its resulting projections are particularly clear in The Last Wave where a sense of post-industrial displacement and a settler loss is mediated by David’s occupation of the domain of Dreamtime. His spiritual journey is a return to Innocence, but it is also an appropriation of an Australian Aboriginal spiritual realm or cultural system of understanding.

David’s process of delving into an Aboriginal episteme is provoked by his investigation into the death of Billy. He meets the accused Aboriginal men and senses that there is more to their story than what they are telling him and it is at this point that he begins to explore the possibility that they are ‘tribal’ Aboriginal people and that the killing of Billy was done in accordance with Aboriginal law. Through David’s investigation into Aboriginal law and particularly an understanding of ‘Dreamtime’, David develops a greater understanding of his own dreams as well as his spiritual identity. Ultimately, the film narrative reveals that David is in fact a member of an early South American tribe (mulkrul) who inhabited Sydney in the distant past. Furthermore, he is a kind of spiritual channel for the South American spirits who exist in Sydney within the parallel realm of ‘Dreamtime’. The mulkrul represent themselves through David’s premonitory dreams. The mulkrul apparently occupy the same spiritual space as the Australian Aboriginal spirits, or at least, both mulkrul and Australian Aboriginal spirits reside in a domain called Dreamtime. The Aboriginal characters in the film insist on the importance of Dreamtime and Aboriginal law and Chris tells David that David is in trouble because he has lost his dreams. Whether Dreamtime is a singular spiritual space, however, or a broader term denoting ‘parallel spiritual realms’ more generally (perhaps something like Kant’s ‘noumenal world’) is unclear. The only explanation within the film itself occurs in a scene in which David has a conversation with Dr Whitburn who tells him that:
Aborigines believe in two forms of time, two parallel streams of activity: one is the daily, objective activity to which you and I are confined, and the other is an infinite spiritual cycle called the Dreamtime — more real than reality itself. Whatever happens in the Dreamtime establishes the values, symbols and laws of Aboriginality. Some people with abnormal spiritual powers have contact with the Dreamtime.

In an interview, Weir comments on the elusive meaning of Dreamtime, saying that “the dream time wasn't something in the past, but was a continuing thing. It is, in fact, another time, and people of great power can step into it and step back into our time. Now, how or what that means, I only touched on” (Weir interviewed by Kass, 1979).

An exploration of this concept and Australian Aboriginal epistemology more generally is beyond the scope of this dissertation, which is more narrowly focused on the representation of these aspects of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginal media makers as Other. In The Last Wave the concept of Dreamtime is only vaguely explored, but whatever exactly the Dreamtime is, David has privileged access to it as a channel for mulkru. Charlie, on the other hand, appears to be from the Dreamtime, a non-human character who sometimes appears as a human and sometimes as an owl. It is clear though that David is not from the same tribe as Charlie and the accused Australian Aboriginal characters and yet he is able to access the same spiritual space and find his identity in their cave at the end of the film where he quite literally discovers a mask made in his image and holds it up to face his own face in a symbolic gesture of coming to see himself how he is on a deeper cultural level.

The symbolism of this narrative may suggest a multicultural understanding and rewriting of colonisation, where David is able to appropriate Aboriginal spaces and yet claim legitimate access to those spaces and a legitimate identity within them, despite his breaking of Aboriginal law in the process. After all, is this not the story of settler colonisation and neo-colonisation in Australia where settlers have taken over Aboriginal territory with hugely detrimental consequences for Aboriginal peoples and cultures, and yet now claim legitimate identities within the space of Australia, as Australians?

Unlike the settlers who, according to Mudrooroo “believe that they were created in Australia sometime in the recent past after Captain James Cook and Governor Arthur Phillip (two Poms) arrived in Australia” (1995:228), Weir suggests that a healthy renegotiation of Australian identities should recognise cultural roots dating further
understanding, David comes to understand himself as a mulkrul, a member of a tribe from South America who came to Sydney but who brought their cultural artefacts and secrets with them. This narrative, which suggests a renegotiation of Australian identities and a recapturing of lost cultures, is centred around the loss and identity crisis of settlers. Australian Aboriginals in this narrative play a supportive function and are prepared to further sacrifice their spaces and culture to assist David in establishing his identity within that space. This is particularly clear by Chris’ action of leading David to the Aboriginal cave where the story of the mulkrul is painted on the wall. Chris does this despite his understanding that he will break Aboriginal law and will be punished accordingly.

The narrative in The Last Wave then reinforces discourses of settler entitlement and centrality in Australia and serves to suggest that Australian Aboriginals must, and are prepared to, continue sacrificing their cultural spaces (both literal and spiritual) for the benefit of settler Australians. In this way, The Last Wave is both a representation of post-colonial anxieties and a construction of a neo-colonial discourse.

Questions of Identity

If film does construct broader social myths, as Peter Weir and I would argue they do, The Last Wave does not offer a very cheery narrative of multicultural Australian ‘unity in diversity’ such as was espoused in 1989, subsequent to the release of this film. In fact, David’s process of discovering his identity is distinctly Manichean in approach. David’s process of discovering who he is involves a process of identifying what he is not, and estranging himself from other people in the film. Throughout the film, as his journey takes him closer and closer to discovering his identity, he moves further and further away from his family and colleagues, the other white settler characters in the film. Most obviously, his move towards self-definition is a move towards a kind of generic aboriginality and a move away from European settler culture. He does not become an Australian Aboriginal, however, but a mulkrul, and although he ‘finds himself’ in an Australian Aboriginal sacred site, his journey towards cultural self-definition involves the appropriation of, rather than assimilation into, Australian Aboriginal culture.

Our audience identification with David remains strong throughout the film, and hence David does not ever become Other to the audience Self despite the changes he undergoes and the transformation of his identity. Instead, we undergo this transformation in identification with him, and remaining Self (with David) are asked to distance ourselves from the Aboriginal and European settler Others within the film. Thus, like David, audience
members undergo a process of redefining Self in terms of a unique set of cultural affinities and an indigenisation through the appropriation of a kind of ‘universal’ aboriginality.

This narrative then does not allow for the possibility of assimilation or integration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters and/or cultural lifeways. Instead, the Manichean divide between Self and Other is maintained in the film between David and the Australian Aboriginals. Furthermore, the European settler culture also becomes Other to David as the narrative progresses. In fact, by the end of the film, David’s process of Manichean self-definition finds him isolated in his cultural identity which is not shared by any other character in the film, and the final image sees him alone on the beach, awaiting the impending destruction of civilisation. This is not an optimistic narrative of Australian nationhood and cultural identity building.

The Manichean approach to questions of identity in *The Last Wave* is further suggested by the centrality of the Self (represented as David) and his relationship to Other characters in the film. Within the economy of the Manichean allegory, the construction of the Self carries with it the premise, as deBeauvoir comments, that the Self is the essential or central being and all Others make up the inessential or marginal foil to the Self’s identity. The Other is valuable only in its alterity, in terms of what it says, through its binary opposite, about the identity of the Self. In *The Last Wave*, David plays a central role as the lead character and the supporting characters facilitate David’s journey but do not play any significant independent roles within the film. Although it is common for a single character to be the focus of a film’s narrative and other characters to play supporting roles, the other characters are not usually removed and estranged from the narrative and the central character as effectively as they are in *The Last Wave*. Marginal characters are more often allowed to co-exist alongside the main character in a film’s narrative despite their lower screen presence in the film, whereas in *The Last Wave*, marginal characters are killed, imprisoned and sent away.

The Aboriginal characters, particularly Chris and Charlie clue David into realising his identity and Chris eventually actually leads David to the underground cave where the wall paintings tell of David’s identity, his ancestors and his cultural heritage as mulkrul, and confirm his apocalyptic vision of the great tidal wave that is about to flood Sydney. Chris must die for transgressing Aboriginal tribal law by taking David to this place, and so having fulfilled his function in terms of David’s journey, Chris is killed off in the film’s narrative. So too, Billy, who Routt identifies as the only other character in the film with a conscious identity crisis, dies early in the film to facilitate David’s entry into the film’s narrative as the lawyer investigating Billy’s death. The other Aboriginal characters accused of manslaughter are found guilty and at that point disappear from the film’s narrative, never to appear again. Only Charlie, as an Aboriginal spirit or ancestor who mysteriously appears and disappears in
dreams and reality and sometimes in the guise of an owl, survives and is present right up until the point that David escapes the cave to face the building tidal wave on the beach.

All the ‘real life’ Aboriginal characters in the film either die or are sentenced to imprisonment. Either way, they are effectively eliminated from the film’s narrative after they have served their function within David’s story of his journey towards self-definition. The dispensability and marginality of the Aboriginal characters in the film suggest their role as the Manichean counterpart to David who is central and essential within the film narrative as the Self with whom the audience is asked to identify. Only Charlie, as a more vague ‘spirit of Aboriginality’ survives. This narrative move suggests the broader settler Australian approach to Aboriginality that appropriates a generalised form of Aboriginality as belonging to all Australians, whilst simultaneously sideline actual Aboriginal peoples as ‘social problems’ (whether they be victims or authors of their problematic status). Charlie can perhaps be understood in this film narrative, as representing the imagined version of Aboriginality that is acceptable and desirable to settler Australians as an integral informant of the identity of Australia, and by proxy, settlers’ identities as Australians.

It is not only Aboriginal characters in The Last Wave who are treated as Other and therefore dispensable, however. David’s wife and children are also easily discarded and are sent away as David gets close to uncovering the secrets of his cultural heritage. He becomes less communicative and less able to relate to other white settlers in the film, the closer he gets to the Aboriginal characters and an ‘Aboriginal episteme’. This is particularly evident in his clash with and ultimate rejection of his lawyer colleague, his brooding silence at a party with his friends and his increasing withdrawal from his family. Once discovering that he is not like ‘them’, David isolates him ‘Self’ from ‘them’ and they are pushed out or at least to the margins of the narrative. This centring of David’s concern with his identity at the expense of disregarding any independent significance of the other characters in the film, reinforces a Manichean understanding of identity. It does not resolve the post-colonial settler identity crisis of defining Self and nation, in terms of a multicultural discourse of equality and oneness despite difference. Instead, it reinforces boundaries between Self and Other where, in this case, a white settler Male (albeit of South American descent) retains the position as essential, central Self.

The Last Wave, as an imaginary construction of one man’s journey of discovery at the expense of Aboriginals, women and all Others (the definition of Other shifts throughout the film as his identity as Self changes), is then a mythical reflection of a broader social truth, the guilty story of the settler occupation of Australia.
Well, is this anything new? Is it new to learn that white men are using women and black people to make identities for themselves - that, as far as white men are concerned, women and black people exist only in order to help them to find themselves? Is it new to learn that colonialism - which we might have thought was something practised on Australia by foreign nations - is being practised on Australians by other Australians? Is it even new to learn that Australian identity is the identity of the colonialist - that is, the stranger from another land with special knowledge to impart to the natives, the exploiter, the seeker-of-identity? (Routt, 1994)

David is successful in discovering his identity with the help of the Aboriginal characters in the film and indeed by breaching Aboriginal law, first by revealing the continued existence of Aboriginal Dreamtime in urban Sydney and later by trespassing in an Aboriginal sacred site. Nevertheless, The Last Wave is not entirely uncritical of this process of settler Australian self-definition by means of appropriating Aboriginality. David’s process of discovering his identity by appropriating Aboriginality results in a re-enactment of “the primal encounter between the indigenous Aborigines and non-Aboriginal invaders, in a fight in the sewers” (Routt, 1994). This re-enactment can be read as a reminder to settler audiences that settler Australian-ness comes at a high moral price, where Aboriginal rights and entitlements have been and continue to be sacrificed for the neo-colonial benefit of settler Australians.

Finally, according to Routt, “you have to ask what are the consequences of David’s search for cultural identity. If, at the end of the film, David has found what it means to be an Australian - which is what I have been insisting is exactly, albeit metaphorically, the case - if he has found that, what does the last image of the film say about the destiny of being an Australian?” (1994)

The significance of the apocalyptic wave

The symbolism of the wave is ambiguous, albeit clearly ominous. For O’Regan it is symbolic of the white invaders’ treatment of Aboriginal and Islander people. Understood in this way, David sits on the beach and having discovered who he is and where he came from he must acknowledge the historical process of usurpation that settler people have engaged with – that is his own ‘guilty secret’. For Routt it represents the power of Aboriginal culture and can be understood as retribution for the settler population’s usurpation of Aboriginal culture, lands and sacred grounds and artefacts - a wave that will “destroy the intruding white civilisation” (Kawin, 1984:11). We discover, however, that the natural aberrances that are represented from the beginning of the film and continue with growing prevalence and magnitude are happening all over the world with all the seasons being muddled up and strange weather patterns taking place all over.
In a small scene in the film between David and an expert on Aboriginal artefacts, Dr. Whitburn, the apocalyptic wave in *The Last Wave* is explained as the ending of a natural cycle, an ending that David has been able to predict through his premonitory dreams.

Dr. Whitburn: You see, a mulkrul has incredible premonitory dreams. They usually appear at the end of a cycle when nature has to renew itself. Most primitive cultures see life in cycles. Each cycle ends in an apocalypse of some kind and then there is a rebirth.

David: What sort of an apocalypse?

Dr Whitburn: Usually a natural cataclysm – a freeze, a flood, a big rain.

Nature’s rebellion in the film narrative is arguably a response to the transgression of Aboriginal law, although as an end to a whole natural cycle, it is unlikely a response to the isolated incidents represented in the film’s narrative. It is unclear whether when David looks at the paintings on the cave wall and finally realises the meaning of his premonitions and that the apocalyptic event is a giant wave, he triggers the cataclysm. His discovery of what is about to happen may be read as the final fulfilment of the prophecy before the wave can take place, or his transgressing the sacred site is the ‘final straw’ that causes the flood. However, understood as a prophetic channel for mulkrul, it is less likely that David causes the flood than that he simply predicts it. Rather, it appears that the end of the natural cycle has caused David’s dreams (as he channels mulkrul premonitions), which in turn has created the context in which David has been able to interact with Aboriginal characters to discover his cultural identity as a mulkrul descendant. But with this reading the transgression of Aboriginal law becomes less significant for the film’s narrative as a reason for the wave of retribution. Instead, with this reading, the transgression of Aboriginal law becomes an enabler for the narrative of David’s premonitions to progress, but does not play an active role in the narrative in terms of a cause and affect chain of events. Weir confirms this idea that the film’s narrative is not primarily concerned with the affects of appropriating elements of Aboriginality on Australian Aboriginals, as much as the settler loss of spirituality and the need for settlers to regain or recreate it.

Deconstructed in terms of genre, however, the ending to *The Last Wave* can be read according to a number of generic conventions. As, at least in part, a horror film, the natural cataclysms in *The Last Wave* can be understood as a device used to construct an atmosphere of terror as a projection of the horror or anxiety of the post-colonial lack of a secure cultural identity. Within this genre it is conventional to leave the horror aspects of the narrative unresolved or to end the film with a ‘cliff-hanger’ or moment of impending horror that leaves audiences with a sense of ill ease. The building tidal wave in the last moments of this film fit within the generic
narrative closure with the purpose of encouraging audiences to creatively imagine possible resolutions to the narrative and hence engage more actively with the issues (or anxieties) reflected or constructed in the film. The impending tidal wave does offer closure, albeit a gloomy and somewhat 'forced' ending that is not unlike the device of 'deus ex machina' that was used in ancient Greek tragedies, when plays would end with a representation of the gods descending to meet out justice amongst mortals and provide closure to narratives that could not be 'naturally' resolved.

Weir acknowledges that this is a problem within the film, admitting: “I didn’t find the solution to the problem of how to end the film. There is no ending and I was painted into a corner. I have seen it happen with other filmmakers dealing in this kind of area. You can’t end it” (Weir interviewed by McGilligan, undated).

I would like to argue that although an argument can be forged for any one of the above interpretations of the significance of the wave, the very lack of specificity employed in the usage of the natural disasters within the film, is a narrative flaw, and for the purposes of this dissertation it tells us little about the discourses according to which Aboriginality is constructed within the film.

**Aboriginal spaces in The Last Wave**

Having established that the dominant narrative in The Last Wave is David’s and that the Aboriginal characters operate within that narrative as marginal characters who facilitate David’s journey but who do not undergo any significant changes themselves, it is interesting to analyse the nature of the (marginal) space that Aboriginal characters occupy within the film.

On quite a literal level, the Aboriginal characters in The Last Wave live in urban Sydney but are featured mainly in dark underground settings. This geographical positioning of Aboriginality on the outskirts or beneath the city centre suggests the marginality of Aboriginal people in Australia, but also fulfils a generic function if the film is understood as, at least in part, a horror film. As “Will Rockett notes, there are certain places in the horror film which are ‘specifically cursed or evil...the Bad Place’ (Rockett, 1988: 105). This Bad Place is ‘a venerable element of horror’ (Clover, 1989: 102)” (McKee, 1995:15).

In horror films the ‘bad place’ is usually a dark, wet place, which for Clover is a projection of a fear of ‘intra-uterine existence’ (Freud, quoted in Clover, 1989: 93) Where horror also involves a character crossing over
and that Otherness is aboriginality like in The Last Wave, the ‘bad place’ is an aboriginal place which is commonly represented as a cave. McKee notes that the cave covered in paintings and housing cultural artifacts is a stereotypical signifier of Aboriginal mysticism and authenticity, which is frequently the threatening Otherness of horror films. In The Last Wave the ‘bad place’ that houses the answers to the film’s mysteries, the discovery of which immediately precedes (if it does not trigger) the appearance of the building apocalyptic wave, is a cave-like place in urban Sydney. McKee comments on this setting of Aboriginality in The Last Wave as well as in Kadaicha:

Here, Aborigines are present in contemporary urban situations. There are no caves. But the films seem loath to present Aborigines in everyday geographical spaces, as though Aboriginality is somehow necessarily imbricated with darkness and the underground. Both of these narratives find it necessary to construct a modern equivalent of these caves. Both turn to sewers, presenting Aborigines as (not fully corporeal) figures that live in dark, dripping tunnels. The films manage not to sacrifice the idea of Aboriginality as associated with caves, despite moving to contemporary urban settings. (McKee, 1995:17)

Taking Clover’s psychoanalytic understanding of places within film narratives reflecting psychological fears and desires and combining this with McKee’s understanding of caves signifying Aboriginal mysticism, the cave-like space in The Last Wave can be understood as a symbolic mysticism which David must discover in order to know himself. The cave itself can then be read as the symbolic space of Dreamtime, which is an Aboriginal mystical realm to which David gains illicit access. He gains both access to Dreamtime through his dreams where he learns Aboriginal secrets and access to the mystical cave as a physical embodiment of the Dreamtime by trespassing in the Aboriginal sacred site. Understood as a physical space representing a spiritual/psychological space, the entire city can be understood as representing a ‘collective unconscious’, where what is underground is the repressed, forgotten, or (as Weir describes it) ‘lost’ understanding of Self and spirituality. The Aboriginal cave then becomes the lost Dreamtime to which, through the representation of David’s discovery of it the film would have us believe, all Australians should have access. Weir himself confirms this reading of the significance of the underground Aboriginal cave in The Last Wave:

I wanted my lawyer, with his material wealth, with his humanitarian principles, to, firstly, glimpse with his mind that there was another lost dream, or spiritual life, and then to touch it. I thought: How can he touch it? I’ll have him go back down, go back down - that’s what I kept saying in my mind. How can he go back down? I thought, Go back down underneath the city, down through the sewer, through the filth, down to the dirt, down to his own lost spiritual life … and there he touches his own lost spiritual life, his own dreaming. In a sense he’s given a gift by the aborigines. (Weir interviewed by Kass, 1979)
But if this underground place is the place where David finds his ‘lost’ spirituality, dreaming, secrets or whatever, then (like the San motto used in the South African coat of arms) the Aboriginal sacred site, Aboriginal secrets and even the spiritual realm of Dreamtime which determines Aboriginal law, can be appropriated as belonging to all Australians. With this reading the film seems to say that it is important for David to find what is ‘lost’ (that is, what once was his) even if this means the breaking of Aboriginal laws and the death of Aboriginal characters. This is a narrative of appropriation of Aboriginality as an essence or ‘spirit of the nation’, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a dangerous narrative that threatens Aboriginal empowerment and ownership of ‘Aboriginality’. Furthermore, when read in this way, The Last Wave appears to suggest that “an Australian finds identity with or through Aboriginal people. That sounds like a fairly radical political stance: to say that we can only get to the real Australia through the experience of Aboriginal people is not the sort of thing Bruce Ruxton would like to hear. It might even give Paul Keating a bit of a twinge” (Routt, 1994).

That settler people can only find an Australian identity with or through Aboriginal people is, of course, an uncomfortable understanding for settler people, and it can be claimed that The Last Wave’s dark apocalyptic theme is a projection of settler anxiety about this claim. The invention of David’s ‘aboriginality’ or at least his identity which is, significantly, buried beneath the city of Sydney can, however, be understood as a symbolic attempt to resolve this anxiety by inventing other forms of aboriginality, where even David who was not born in Australia is able to discover ‘aboriginal’ (or at least, very early settler) roots in Australia. The construction of a settler history in Australia (David’s, as a migrant from South America) and a legitimate identity, where what was ‘lost’ is found through the Aboriginal characters and their cultural spaces, can be read as an attempt to resolve the uncomfortable newness of the settler Australian ‘nation’. This uncomfortable ‘newness’ would later (in 1989) result in the reformulation of Australia as a multicultural nation, but in The Last Wave is negotiated in more Manichean terms where ‘unity in diversity’ is not represented as a viable option. Instead the film’s narrative is a colonising story of settler usurpation of Aboriginality, where David does not become an Australian Aboriginal and reconstruct his identity in terms of oneness with the Aboriginal characters in the film, but appropriates an imagined essence of aboriginality. He does this by trespassing on the Aboriginal sacred sites and transgressing Aboriginal law to ultimately reconstruct his own identity as a mulkrul Self against both an Aboriginal and European settler Other.
The Manichean divide between Self and the Aboriginal Other in *The Last Wave* is further established through the representation of Aboriginal spaces as distinct from non-Aboriginal spaces. Although David eventually occupies an Aboriginal space, his occupation of this space is an act of trespassing which amounts to transgressing Aboriginal law. It is at this place that he undergoes a change, where he finally becomes aboriginal (mulkrul) by accepting his cultural identity. Within the horror genre, this Aboriginal space then clearly signifies the ‘terrible place’ of transformation, which is very unlike the spaces occupied by the European settler culture. By representing the Aboriginal realm as distinct from the non-Aboriginal realm, the binary divide between the settler Self (of the filmmaker and dominant Australian audience) and the Aboriginal Other is visually reinforced, and this difference between the two worlds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal reality are constructed through the use of a number of binary visual signifiers within *The Last Wave*.

One of the most obvious dichotomies that is established in the film is that between nature and civilisation, where as David moves away from settler culture and increasingly engages with ‘Aboriginality’ and Aboriginal systems of understanding, nature is increasingly represented as dominating civilisation (Western settler civilisation). The binary between civilisation and nature is as clearly constructed in the film, as is the binary between settler and Aboriginal lifeways and epistemes. These two binary constructions are not unrelated. The distinction between nature and civilisation assists in maintaining the imagined line between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities, where Aboriginals are typically understood as having a far closer relationship to nature than non-Aboriginals, and where frequently the divide between Aboriginal people and nature itself is virtually collapsed.

In *The Last Wave*, “Aboriginality is linked to deadly hailstones, and black, polluted rain” (McKee, 1995:10). Aboriginals are also more in control of nature, which is represented in the scene where Charlie is able to stop the torrential rain when pointing the bone at Billy, whereas non-Aboriginals in the film are, despite their pretences at being in control, defenceless against nature. The building prominence of paranormal natural phenomena is finally represented in the form of the tidal wave. Despite the ambiguous meaning of the wave and the cause of the apocalyptic ending of a natural cycle, the consistent association of Aboriginality with natural aberrances is significant.
This seems to fit the pattern of a conflict that is not too uncommon in your and my everyday experience: the conflict between “culture” and “nature” - between what we think of as civilised and therefore artificial and what we think of as pre-civilised and therefore natural. This conflict is often expressed in Australian (and other) cultural products, and very often the original inhabitants of the land are constructed in such products as representatives of what is natural and what, therefore, should not be disturbed by the process of history... The Last Wave is no exception to this practice. (Routt, 1994)

This ‘uncivilised’ or ‘pre-civilised’ space usually occupied by Aboriginals in narratives authored by non-Aboriginals, is slightly more complex in The Last Wave where the question of the authenticity and Aboriginality of urban Aboriginals is prominent. Although associated with natural phenomena (particularly rain and bizarre weather patterns), the Australian Aboriginals in the film exist in post-industrialised urban settings.

The dichotomy of nature and civilisation, signified in the film by the domination of the trappings of civilisation by nature, such as the water pouring from David’s car radio, taps running in the rain and so on, suggests that ‘civilisation’ cannot overcome or control nature. This offers a parallel, where in the same way the urbanisation of Australian Aboriginals does not overcome the continued existence of their ‘natural’/spiritual Aboriginality, the power of which supersedes the control of Western civilisation.

This argument for the authenticity of urban Aboriginals is handled with sensitivity in The Last Wave, on both a symbolic level and quite literally in the courtroom scenes and in scenes that show David arguing against his lawyer colleagues regarding the existence of tribal Aborigines in Sydney.

Questions of authenticity

David is encouraged not to use the angle of tribal law in his defence of the accused Aboriginals because tribal Aboriginals are believed by the white settler lawyers not to exist in Sydney. Even the pathologist, unable to discover what killed Billy, discounts the option that it may be tribal law because he believes that tribal law does not apply to urban Aboriginals. Michael, David’s colleague argues with him:

Michael: Well the tribal law angle might work if you’re dealing with tribal people in a tribal area, but we’re not. These are city people.
David: You might be wrong.
Michael: Oh come on David! I think I have to dispel a few rather romantic notions you seem to have. Number one: the traditional culture of the Aborigines only survives among full-bloods in the far North and in some parts of the desert. The nearest tribal Aborigines live a thousand miles from Sydney. Number two: the people we call Aborigines in the cities are no different culturally from depressed whites. They destroy their languages, their ceremonies, their songs, their dances and their tribal laws.

The settler lawyers and pathologists make the claim that the accused Aboriginals cannot be tribal because they live in the city. “The white man’s city, then, is presumed to have destroyed the tribal identity which is presumed to be the whole cultural identity of Aboriginal people” (Routt, 1994). The representation of a literally ‘underground’ tribal Aboriginal existence in Sydney and the parallel depiction of Western civilisation’s inability to tame nature (associated with Aboriginality) reflects the filmmaker’s understanding that “the destruction of Aboriginal culture is a self-serving lie” (Routt, 1994). This lie is effective in denying urban Aboriginals an authentic Aboriginal identity and access to privileged political claims of First Peoples, enjoyed by Aboriginals living in ‘tribal areas’. The political significance of denying Aboriginal authenticity to Aboriginals who do not fit into the narrow constricts of settler imagined definitions of Aboriginality, have been discussed in detail earlier in this dissertation, and are represented in the unfair legal procedures that lead to the conviction of the Aboriginal men on the charges of manslaughter in *The Last Wave*.

The invalidity of manufacturing definition boundaries of Aboriginality is clearly reflected in *The Last Wave* by the very discrepancy between settler assumptions regarding urban Aboriginals and the Aboriginal ‘reality’ that is constructed in the film. The question of urban Aboriginals’ recourse to tribal law in urban areas, however, is problematised within the film. The Aboriginal characters themselves do not admit to being tribal and thereby deny their own authenticity as Aboriginal people, because this confession would breech Aboriginal law. Chris asks David: “Can’t you see it’s hard for me? Your people pulling me this way, something more strong is holding me back”.

This conflicted condition of living in and between two cultures is also typical of the settler post-colonial condition where many settlers feel allegiance to both the new colonised land and the imperial ‘mother country’. In Australia, this allegiance to a remote imperial centre is obvious in the results of a recent referendum that confirmed that the Australian popular opinion is that the union jack should continue to be displayed on the Australian flag. Of course, the stronger the allegiance and deeper the connection to a remote culture is, the more torn an individual will feel. For the Australian Aboriginals in *The Last Wave*, this is a dire situation that results in their imprisonment, but their insistence on nonetheless obeying Aboriginal law reflects the
This problematic cultural dualism and often conflict is eventually shared by David in The Last Wave, where he finds himself caught between the settler culture and his identity as a mulkrul. It is not so much the danger of harbouring an identity crisis potentially resulting from cultural conflict that is constructed as the central concern in The Last Wave, but rather the danger of not recognising deeper cultural roots than those of the ‘new’ Australian culture. This priority is reflected through the Aboriginal characters’ insistence that they obey Aboriginal law at any personal cost to themselves, and is blatantly commented on in a scene where Charlie and Chris and David discuss the nature of tribal Aboriginal existence.

Chris (translating Charlie’s words): We are nothing but the law we learned from our forefathers.
David: But surely men are more important than laws.
Chris (translating): No. The Law is more important than just men.

Later, in an urgent conversation between Chris and David, the greater importance of recognising cultural heritage, history and spirituality is again represented.

David: You’re in desperate trouble.
Chris: No. You’re in trouble. You!
David: Why do you say that?
Chris: You don’t know what dreams are anymore.

It is this sense of settler loss of the past and an Eden-like spirituality that is the central concern of The Last Wave, which David mediates for settler audiences by discovering his own lost culture and epistemology. This mediation can be understood as the projection of a settler desire to an imagined pre-industrial state of spirituality and belongingness. In the light of this desire, the apocalyptic tidal wave, whatever its narrative function within the film, can be understood as a corresponding projected anxiety regarding the frustration of this desire.
Besides the association of natural phenomena with Aboriginality and the appearance of Aboriginal characters in dreams, the casting of the Aboriginal roles in *The Last Wave* plays an important function in constructing a discourse of Aboriginality or definitions of what it is to be Aboriginal. Notably, all the Aboriginal characters within the film are black. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this places limits on ‘authentic’ Aboriginality, which denies the hybridity of Aboriginal peoples in Australia and works to the disadvantage of non-black Aboriginals who fall outside of the acceptable definitions of Australian Aboriginality.

The narrative presence of Billy in *The Last Wave* is useful in terms of noting that there is a diversity of Aboriginal people in Australia and that different groups have different lifeways and cultural traditions and artefacts. Obviously, as a narrative film, *The Last Wave* cannot be expected to represent the enormous diversity of Aboriginal and Islander groups within Australia. It also has no responsibility to educate audiences regarding the hybridity and diversity of Aboriginality in Australia, and the representation of only two Aboriginal groups cannot do this, but the acknowledgement that not all Aboriginals are alike goes a long way towards dispelling settler conceptions of an homogenous Australian Aboriginality.

Another issue worth noting about the representation of Aboriginality in *The Last Wave* is that the Aboriginal characters in the film are all impoverished and are framed within the film’s narrative as a ‘social problem’ within urban Australian society despite their other noble qualities of integrity and spirituality. There is no mundane presence of Aboriginality, as McKee would like to see in Australian media, within the film. This has the odd result of simultaneously romanticising Aboriginal characters as well as representing them as socially problematic victims of modernity. As victims of modernity, however, they are authentically ‘tribal’ (understood here as culturally sensitive) people existing in a context that does not recognise them for who they are. The encoded discourse here is then not that Aboriginals have been impoverished by being removed from a pre-modern condition, but rather that the modern urban environment is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate cultural laws and lifeways in conjunction with national Australian laws. Framed in this way, the poverty and depressed social condition of the Aboriginals in the film constructs a social comment that is critical of the post/neo-colonial Australian society and its ‘newness’ rather than of the Australian Aboriginals themselves.
Although not directly addressed, issues of land rights are also suggested in the film’s narrative. The construction of sacred Aboriginal sites in Sydney is a narrative reminder of the ‘real-life’ colonisation of Australian territory and the destruction of Aboriginal cultural things (if not cultures themselves). This reference is, however, oblique and the film does not construct a resistant narrative or take a political stance for or against land right claims. The colonisation of the Aboriginal scared sites by David in the film, in fact, displays a remarkable insensitivity to this issue and a strong sense of settler entitlement to Aboriginal lands, things and culture.

Finally, the death and containment of all the Aboriginal characters in The Last Wave, bar Charlie who is not a ‘real-life’ character, confirms McKee’s claim that Aboriginals are consistently represented as fatal in Australian cinema. Here their (Chris’ and Billy’s) fatality is not as a result of their violence and in fact, their deaths happen either off-screen (in the case of Chris) or are completely unbloody (as with Billy), which is uncharacteristic of the nature of conventional representations of Aboriginal fatality as an extension of a projection of the violent Other. Nonetheless, these deaths and unpleasant fates of all the ‘real-life’ Aboriginal characters can be understood as a projection of a settler desire to eliminate the Other. Particularly within this particular film narrative where David is represented as dependent on the Australian Aboriginal characters for his self-definition, this acts as an uncomfortable reminder of the colonial Self’s Manichean dependency on the Other for the Self’s identity. “Thus, as Sartre says, the colonial system simultaneously wills the annihilation and multiplication of the natives” (JanMohamed, 1983:4). In The Last Wave the desire for the annihilation of the Australian Aboriginals is played out in the killing off and imprisoning of the Aboriginal characters within the film.

The Making of The Last Wave

The question of production practices regarding narrative fiction films is less sensitive than that regarding documentary or ethnographic films where real people and communities are disturbed by the filmmaking process and the effects of the representation of the subject community are felt more immediately. Narrative fiction films representing specific groups of people or cultures do have an impact on people, however, and questions of how peoples are represented are therefore significant. Specifically regarding narrative films about Australian Aboriginals, production practices have been suggested that avoid insensitivity towards Aboriginal people and, more seriously, transgressions of Aboriginal law, appropriation of Aboriginal cultural objects and trespassing in Aboriginal lands and sacred sites. It has been noted that Australian Aboriginals are sensitive to the use of Aboriginal lands, artefacts and secrets by non-Aboriginal filmmakers and have
Suggested that films representing Australian Aboriginality should, at least, be made in collaboration with Aboriginal people.

Peter Weir and the filmmakers of The Last Wave were reportedly sensitive to these issues and worked with the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation in Sydney in the pre-production phase of making the film. The director of the foundation, Lance Bennett, approved a draft of the screenplay and assisted Weir in casting clan-leader Nanjiwarra Amagula in the role of Charlie. Weir notes that on his first meeting with Bennett, Bennett was highly suspicious of a feature filmmaker delving into tribal cultural matters. It's all very well to photograph a tribal man with spears against Ayres Rock, but another to delve into the system of perception, which I wanted to. So he screened me, he read my draft screenplay, and finally he passed me and he said, “OK. I'll help you”. Everything passed through the hands of the tribal aborigines we used. (Weir interviewed by Kass, 1979)

This adherence to recommended filmmaking practices involving Australian Aboriginals resulted in some potentially exploitative practices being avoided in The Last Wave. Weir cites the example that he initially wanted to use existing Aboriginal symbols in the film, which Nandji strongly vetoed. It was then agreed that the art director would invent a new set of imaginary symbols for the film, which were approved by Nandji before being incorporated into the film.

The role Nandjiwara and Gulpilil (the actor who played Chris) played in influencing the making of The Last Wave did not only extend to vetoing suggestions, but was also an active role of suggesting more legitimate alternatives. Weir notes that the dialogue of the Aboriginal characters changed during production and the Aboriginal actors contributed material to the scenes such as in the scene where Chris and Charlie have dinner with David, Gulpilil added the explanation of how, when his brother is calling him, he has a certain sensation in his arm. Weir also recalls that the idea of David being a mulkrul came from Nandjiwara and Gulpilil, ‘mulkrul’ being the name that Gulpilil used for the white people who came to Australia before the arrival of the Europeans. Also, Nandjiwara insisted that the character Charlie could not be human in the film, but would need to be a spirit. He explained to Weir that although there are no more descendants of the original Sydney Aboriginal people remaining, the spirits of this tribe remain in the tribe’s sacred sites, “so if there's a sacred site under Sydney he said, ‘This is true, your script is true. The spirits will be there, therefore I cannot be human’. That was one change because in my story Charlie was human, initially. He pointed out
Weir comments on how the experience of making *The Last Wave* was a highly charged learning experience for him and he comments that only about three percent of what he learnt during that period is evident in the film itself. His approach of learning from the Aboriginal actors and adapting the script accordingly is commendable and yet, despite the Aboriginal influence on the production, the narrative retains elements of appropriation and colonisation. Although one can be grateful that this appropriation reportedly did not occur in the ‘real-life’ context of the making of the film, it is still problematic and potentially powerful in its impact on popular discourses regarding Aboriginal people and settler rights to Aboriginal culture, lands and so on, which in turn impact on ‘real-life’ people who live in Australian public spaces where the circulating discourses affect relations between people in a society.

**Final comments on The Last Wave**

Films both reflect social discourses and are simultaneously powerful tools in the creation of social myths. *The Last Wave*, as a film by non-Aboriginal filmmakers that represents Aboriginality is both a projection of settler anxieties and desires, and it offers new myths regarding Australian identities and social arrangements, through its construction of Self/Other identities and the narrative exploration of sensitive post-colonial themes.

The central narrative in the film, of a settler’s journey towards self-definition and a regained state of spirituality or Innocence before the Fall, is reflective of settler identity crises and anxieties regarding ‘newness’ and ‘not-belongingness’ in Australia and post-industrial anxieties of lost spirituality in the light of an Aboriginal presence that appears to embody these desired qualities of belongingness, secure cultural identities and a spiritual consciousness. These settler post-colonial tensions are, to some degree (albeit temporarily), resolved in the film through identification with David as a settler Self who discovers his connection with Dreamtime, his history and cultural identity and spirituality as mulkrul. These are all found in Aboriginal spaces buried beneath Sydney, thereby rooting his settler identity in Australia and offering him a share in the belongingness of Aboriginals. Through the projection of settler post-colonial anxieties and corresponding desires, *The Last Wave* offers a new myth of an Australian nation in which settlers can find their identities and ‘roots’ by legitimately appropriating Aboriginality as the ‘spirit of the nation’.
But no sooner has this post-colonial anxiety been relieved within the film's narrative, than the apocalyptic wave appears to destroy settler (and all) civilisation. This ominous ending to the film, although ambiguous in its exact significance, engenders a sense of distress. This seems to imply that the resolution of settler anxieties within the film at the expense of the Aboriginal characters, all of whom are killed or imprisoned, is not a viable or satisfactory solution to settler post-colonial anxieties.

The Last Wave then operates in a negotiated narrative space between projected anxieties and desires of a post-colonial settler condition in a settler colony inhabited by Aboriginal peoples.
MAORI REPRESENTATIONS IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND FILM

A brief overview of the cinematic constructions of ‘Maori’ in Aotearoa/New Zealand film

Introduction

Cinematic representations in Aotearoa/New Zealand have been largely dominated by Hollywood imports and other foreign films screened in Aotearoa/New Zealand cinemas. “For many years New Zealanders were amongst the most frequent movie goers in the Western world, but few of the films they went to see were made at home” (Daley, 1997). Martin and Edwards’ 1996 publication New Zealand Film attests to the sparse film production that took place in Aotearoa/New Zealand between 1940 and 1996, with a total of 162 films being cited. This list includes documentaries, films that are shorter than the conventional 4000-foot criteria of a feature film, and a number of films with only vague connections to Aotearoa/New Zealand. Notably, the great majority of the films listed were produced since the 1970s, with only a handful being released before then. Therefore, although the representation of Aotearoa/New Zealand society in local films can be understood to reflect the discourses of the society, due to the low presence of local cinema output, it can be argued that local film does not have the same power to inform and influence audiences’ attitudes towards their nation and the social arrangements within it, as is possible in other societies such as America, where the local media is dominant in shaping public opinion.

The focus of this chapter will be primarily on the post-colonial condition of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Self/Other identity negotiations that are and have been played out between Maori and Pakeha9 peoples in the imagining of the Aotearoa/New Zealand ‘nation’. These Other/Self debates have been particularly overt in Aotearoa/New Zealand society since the 1980s and this has resulted in greater post-colonial tensions in negotiating the identity of an Aotearoa/New Zealand nation and both Maori and Pakeha spaces within it. According to Blythe, “there are still seemingly endless acrimonious debates as to whether Maori culture (a large abstraction in itself) is ‘oppressed,’ ‘developing,’ ‘decayed,’ ‘reviving,’ ‘post-colonial,’ ‘oppositional,’

9 Pakeha literally means foreigner(s)
It is currently in circulation, along with debates as to whether Pakeha culture is the opposite of these (1994:8). It is this negotiation of the Maori position within Aotearoa/New Zealand as Self/Other and the correlating negotiation of the Aotearoa/New Zealand nation as integrated, bi-cultural or as separatist, that will form the spine of my discussion in the first section of this chapter.

I have selected *Once Were Warriors*, directed by Maori director Lee Tamahori, as the subject of my film analysis in the second part of this chapter. This focuses my discussion less on settler representations of the Other and more on cinematic post-colonial expression as a possible forum for aboriginal renegotiations of formerly marginal aboriginal positions and as a Maori construction of a resistant post-colonial and separatist bi-cultural discourse.

Whereas *The Great Dance* and *The Last Wave* represented aboriginality from a settler perspective, *Once Were Warriors* offers an implicit critique of the effects of colonisation and an exploration of a Maori place within contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand. As such is a post-colonial film, where ‘post-colonial’ is understood to denote a resistant body of work, critiquing colonialism and neo-colonial imperialism.

**Aotearoa/New Zealand as a post-colonial nation**

Aotearoa/New Zealand as a post/neo-colonial nation is unique in its social arrangement and dynamics between the dominant settler population from mainly England, and its Maori population, which makes up approximately 12 percent of the overall Aotearoa/New Zealand population.

Maori identity, as an imagined homogenous identity category, is a contested identity construction. The Maori population consists of many tribes (iwi) that are not historically united in an understanding of themselves as ‘Maori’. Instead, in the past, each iwi maintained its own cultural identity, leadership, lands and traditions. Identity boundaries between one iwi and another were constructed and maintained, often with hostility. An extensive breakdown of iwi identity distinctions came about with the forging of a Maori federation prior to the 1860s land wars, and in recent times, a migration of Maori people from iwi areas to the Aotearoa/New Zealand urban centres. With the reconstruction of an identity difference between Maori and Pakeha since the 1980s, iwi affiliations have simultaneously been collapsed and reasserted. A ‘Maori’ Self has been imagined as an identity category against a Pakeha Other, and simultaneously, in the building of the Maori Self, increased
emphasis has been placed on Maoritanga (the Maori way of doing things), which inevitably recognises the diversity of iwi.

The Maori population is then itself heterogeneous and Self/Others divisions exist between Maori iwi as well as across Maori/Pakeha identity divides, as inevitably, there are divides within the Pakeha population as well. Furthermore, each iwi can be sub-divided into various whanau (extended family groups). This serves to highlight the constructedness of identity boundaries, where Self/Others divisions are imagined according to certain privileged differences between groups of people that are assumed to be relevant and central signifiers of identity.

The dominant grand narratives of Aotearoa/New Zealand nationhood, however, have historically prioritised Maori/Pakeha and New Zealand/British distinctions as the definitive identity relations in the imagining of the Aotearoa/New Zealand nation. Blythe makes the point that “in New Zealand, the national mythology has always been inherently dualistic, whether it was located on the fracture line between the British Empire and Maoriland or whether it repressed the Maori Other within itself” (1994:279). As a British colony and later a dominion, dominant settler New Zealand’s identity boundaries (when settlers are categorised as a unified Self) operate on two main axes where both Britain is Other to the colonial Self, and Maori is Other to the coloniser settler Self and both British and Maori are sometimes understood as Self and sometimes as Other, depending on which identity axis or fracture line is in place.

The dualism of the Aotearoa/New Zealand nation along the Maori/Pakeha fracture line was a feature of its early colonial status and has come into greater focus again since the 1980s, which saw a Maori political drive towards bi-culturalism and a post-colonial redress of colonial inequities. The grand narrative of the Aotearoa/New Zealand nation and its relations between Maori and Pakeha has shifted between integration and separatist discourses, where difference is elided and reinstated in continually renegotiated boundary constructions between Other and Self.
The Maori people are descendants of Polynesian settlers who were the first to settle Aotearoa/New Zealand more than a thousand years ago, whereas English settlers first arrived on Aotearoa/New Zealand soil in the early nineteenth century. The early colonisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand and its indigenous Maori population did not occur through a hostile military invasion but rather through a continued influx of British settlers and the assumed sovereignty of British rule. This was put into effect gradually over a long period of time and justified in terms of the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840. This gradual and relatively peaceful process of colonisation is the reason why “white New Zealanders have long thought of their country as a model of humanitarian colonization. Most Maori take a different view, however, informed by generations of their ancestors witnessing the theft of land and erosion of rights that were guaranteed by a treaty with the white man” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:761).

Contemporary socio-political relations between Maori and Pakeha people are still largely influenced by the Treaty of Waitangi, which was signed between Governor William Hobson, as a representative of the Crown, and approximately five hundred Maori chiefs. The legitimacy of this treaty has, however, been largely contested and discredited by revisionist historians over the past couple of decades.

The implications of the treaty were explained and translated by a number of Pakeha representatives and Maori understandings of the meaning of the treaty were diverse, often vague and sometimes contradictory. The public explanation of the content of the treaty by Governor Hobson reportedly asserted that the treaty was an agreement to the establishment of English sovereignty over English settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which did not extend to control over Maori peoples. The wording of the treaty also appears to suggest that the extent of British sovereignty extends only to British subjects (Pakeha settlers) in an agreement to a bi-cultural Aotearoa/New Zealand. This popular understanding of the treaty at the time is expressed in the 10 March 1842 editorial for The Bay of Islands Observer, written by Barzillai Quaife who comments that “there are really two distinct communities in this country, living and more or less mingling with each other, governed on different principles, and by different laws and customs, and acknowledging a totally different authority” (Quoted in Moon, 1999).
However, the treaty was used as proof of an agreement between Maori and Pakeha to the sovereignty of England over Aotearoa/New Zealand and all of its inhabitants, despite the verbal explanations of the treaty to the contrary.

“The assumed right to govern Maori was adopted gradually and in an ad hoc fashion, in contrast to the earlier reluctance to extend rule to anyone other than the European settlers” (1999), and this eventually extended to an assumption of the Pakeha right to Maori lands as well, despite the fact that part of the Treaty of Waitangi noted that Maori would retain their rights to their lands as long as they wanted them. However, the treaty’s clauses were exercised when convenient to colonial settlers, and the clause that noted that Maori would only be able to sell land to the Crown if they wished to sell it, was one such clause that was put into effect. In practice, the colonial government undervalued the land and bought large tracts from the Maori for less than they were worth and then sold it to settlers at far higher prices. Furthermore, where Maori refused to sell, land was sometimes seized.

By the early 1850s there was a growing dissatisfaction among Maori and a resistance to land sales. This resulted in the formation of a kind of Maori federation called the King Movement, that to a degree united the Maori iwi in a 1858 resolve not to sell any more land. The clash of Maori/Pakeha interests came to a head in 1860 with the beginning of the land wars that would continue throughout the 1860s with armed clashes between Maori and Pakeha resulting in forced land sales and land confiscations. Although fighting had largely abated by the end of the 1860s, peace was only declared in 1881.

**Maori assimilation into Pakeha New Zealand**

According to Spivak, colonisation takes place not only through a process of coercion (military or other) but through the co-operation of the colonised in “an interactive process where the European agent in consolidating the imperialist Sovereign Self, induces the native to collude in its own subject(ed) formation as other and voiceless” (Parry, 1995:37). The coloniser must convince the Other of his/her otherness. In achieving this end, the role of the media, along with education and the imposition of a foreign language on the colonised cannot be underestimated, as “it establishes the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to the ‘universality’ of the values embodied in English literary texts, and it represents the colonised to themselves as inherently inferior beings – ‘wild’, ‘barbarous’, ‘uncivilised’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995:426).

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the colonisation of Maori occurred not only through mass European settlement, treaty swindles, land grabs and coercive measures to marginalise Maori within Aotearoa/New Zealand, but
despite of the dominant Maori understanding of their agreement with the Pakeha in the Treaty of Waitangi to a dualistic coexistence, “Maori began to adapt their culture to accommodate Pakeha in a way that few other native peoples have – selling their crops, operating flour mills and running coastal shipping” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:765). Perhaps most powerful in assimilating Maori into Pakeha lifeways, however, was the adoption of English by Maori and the establishment of English as the primary language of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

A high degree of Maori cultural assimilation took place from the first arrival of British settlers on Aotearoa/New Zealand soil, exacerbated by the inter-marriage of Maori and Pakeha. Maori children began to attend mission schools and adults were employed in public work programmes commissioned by the New Zealand colonial government. This adaptation to Pakeha lifeways to a large extent collapsed cultural divides between various iwi and resulted in a hybridised Maori population co-existing with a largely unchanged Pakeha majority. The New Zealand “policy of assimilation relied entirely on Maori conforming to the Pakeha way of doing things and made no concession to Maoritanga. Maori adapted incredibly quickly to Pakeha ways but were rewarded with the loss of their land” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:773).

The marginalisation of Maoritanga accelerated in the years following the land wars, as the Pakeha settlers attempted to build a New Zealand nation, “where difference was perceived as tantamount to a betrayal of the emergent sense of nationhood” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:xi). “Throughout this period, Maori tradition was ignored by settlers and an Anglo-Saxon world view came to dominate all aspects of New Zealand life, by 1871 the Maori language was no longer used for teaching in schools. A defeated people were widely thought to be close to extinction” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:766-767).

The military defeat of the Maori peoples, the appropriation of Maori lands and the colonisation of Maori peoples under a settler government alongside the policy of Maori assimilation into Pakeha New Zealand culture and society resulted in a gradual process of smudging the divide between Self and Other between Maori and Pakeha. Furthermore, the high percentage of intermarriage between Maori and Pakeha since the colonisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand, to the extent that some believe there are no ‘whole-blood’ Maori left in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand, assisted in collapsing, to some extent, the Self/Other distinction and building a relatively homogenous New Zealand nation (Tamahori interviewed by Gillard, 1996).

Blythe calls this narrative of a homogenous New Zealand nation, the Integration myth, within which there is little space for an assertion of Maoritanga. The Integration myth was premised on a co-option of Maori culture
Despite insisting that New Zealand was an integrated nation, the dominant Pakeha population understood Maori as an integrated part of the Pakeha nation but as unequal to the dominant, ruling class of Pakeha peoples. Particularly those Maori who were less able to assimilate Pakeha lifeways, formed an underclass of peoples who were marginal to the Pakeha-centred New Zealand nation.

Post-colonial resistance and a move towards a bi-cultural Aotearoa/New Zealand

The mass migration of Maori to the cities, and particularly Auckland in the years following World War II resulted in greater contact between urban Maori and Pakeha, which “exposed weaknesses in the Pakeha belief that the country’s race relations were the best in the world” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:770). By the 1970s, despite the Integration myth, Maori had formed a poor underclass and “the deracination of urban Maori was creating social unrest which, left unchannelled, resulted in high Maori unemployment and a disproportionate representation in prisons” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:770). The result of this was an increasing Maori dissatisfaction and a growing resistance to the exploitation of Maori over the preceding one and a half centuries. Part of this resistance involved a revision of colonial history and a remobilisation and contestation of the Treaty of Waitangi. Particular emphasis was placed on challenging land grabs that were justified in terms of the treaty. “Maori began to question the grievances that were aired at occupations of traditional land at Bastion Point in Auckland and Raglan, and through a petition delivered to parliament after a march across the North Island” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:770).

Under the Labour government, elected in 1984 under David Lange, legal recognition was eventually given to the Treaty of Waitangi for the first time since the mid nineteenth century and the historical ill treatment of Maori was addressed. However, “it is only really in the 1980s and 1990s that the Pakeha paternal view has been challenged, with the country reacting by adopting biculturalism” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:773). This policy offered official recognition of the legitimacy of Maoritanga in Aotearoa/New Zealand and constructed a grand national narrative of the co-existence of two main cultural groups – Maori and Pakeha - within one Aotearoa/New Zealand nation.

The construction of a bi-cultural discourse involves a reconstruction of cultural differences between Maori and Pakeha and a reinstatement of identity boundaries between Self and Other. It is therefore unsurprising that Maori political claims and rejections of Pakeha paternalism resulted in a renewed interest in Maoritanga. It was in this climate of reasserting Maori difference and calling for a reinstatement of some of the tenets of the
Treaty of Waitangi, as dominantly understood by Maori peoples for the self-sovereignty of Maori iwi; that Donna Awatere’s controversial political essays titled *Maori Sovereignty* were written in 1984.

Awatere argued that Maori and Pakeha values were incompatible and in arguing this point, “she set up an essential and irreconcilable difference between Pakeha New Zealand and Maori Aotearoa” (Blythe, 1994:153) and called for a separatist reconstruction of Aotearoa. Awatere’s separatist vision is not consistent with the widely accepted policy of bi-culturalism, where Maori and Pakeha people co-exist in one nation with two dominant cultures. Instead, Awatere’s ideal is for the establishment of Maori sovereignty over all of Aotearoa, a reversal of Pakeha colonisation, where “white people of any generation have no business being in this country” (Awatere quoted in Blythe, 1994:150). According to Awatere, “all efforts at biculturalism have only resulted in integration and assimilation, bitterness and tears. No more” (Quoted in Blythe, 1994:150). She also suggests that Pakeha should acknowledge that they belong to an imposed New Zealand superstructure rather than to the more essential Maori Aotearoa. “For Pakeha, this logic leads to choice between being colonized within Maori Aotearoa (atavism) or going into exile (expatriation)” (Blythe, 1994:155).

Blythe makes the valuable point that this reconstruction of difference between Maori and Pakeha, Self and Other, relies on essentialist understandings of a ‘Maori’ identity, which denies the hybridity of Maori iwi affiliations. According to him, “Awatere annihilates cultural difference (‘opposition’) in the name of a ‘new identity’ defined by the Maori, and then re-establishes this difference (as ‘choices’), running into exactly the same double bind that confronts the Pakeha mythologist: annexation or exclusion” (1994:156). Furthermore, Awatere’s essentialist discourse of a binary opposition between Maori and Pakeha identity does not recognise or accommodate the high degree of Pakeha/Maori interbreeding and cultural integration that has resulted in an elision of differences between Self and Other, where in reality, the Self is often also simultaneously the Other.

The post-colonial renegotiations of cultural identities and nationhood in the light of colonial discrimination are fought in the contested no-man’s land between Self and Other. Over the past three decades, Self/Other debates regarding Maori and Pakeha have given rise to further debates about whether New Zealand is an integrated nation or whether Aotearoa/New Zealand is in fact bi-cultural. These contesting discourses represent some of the central post-colonial concerns: negotiations of identity and nationhood.

**A brief history of Pakeha cinematic representations of Maori as Self/Other**

As I have already mentioned, the Aotearoa/New Zealand cinematic output prior to the 1970s was slight. There was, however, a disproportionate Maori visibility in these films, where Maori were presented as characters and
According to Blythe, “New Zealand’s Pioneer Myth was generally organized around … familiar dualisms of Man/Nature, law/disorder, civilization/wilderness, and so on, in much the same way as the American Frontier Myth” (Blythe, 1994:74). The representations of Maori/Pakeha relations were arranged in terms of these binaries, where Maori were dominantly shown as the binary opposite of Pakeha characters, and associated with nature, disorder and the wilderness. In all of the three main trends of representing Maori in the imperial age of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Maori were represented according to the standard commodity of the prehistoric, in a time and place disconnected from the socio-political context of the time of the release of the films. This territory of ‘Utopia before the Fall’ became known as Maoriland which “was mainly an exotic and utopian synonym for New Zealand” (Blythe, 1994:16).

Maoriland became the romantic setting of the timeless romance, in which Maori were generically represented as unaffected by history. Their utopian existence in these films can be understood as a projection of post-industrial anxiety, particularly in the wake of World War I and a desire to return to a time of greater innocence and security.

**The timeless romance**

The timeless romance films were particularly popular with foreign films shot in New Zealand, where “the most striking feature of American, British and French films shot in New Zealand between 1910 and 1930 … is that they are all set in Maoriland” (Blythe, 1994:20-21). The Maori characters that populate these films are predominantly noble savages, “all quite unlike their European counterparts in that they are not subject to the ravages of time, history, or society” (Blythe, 1994:21). Imagined as innocents in a state of Eden before the Fall, Maori were then constructed as static and essentialist prehistoric aboriginals who were essentially Other to the European/settler/Western Self of the ‘real-life’ socio-political society of the time.

Maoriland ... was, in short, designed to prevent the Maori from becoming fallen like the West itself. This idealism served as an implicit rebuke of the West by holding out a Maori Other who kept intact all the values and aspirations associated nostalgically with nineteenth-century Europe and America before the high-water mark of imperialism. World War I, and the onset of intellectual and technological modernism, an Other who did not suffer doubt because he/she was hermetically sealed within the timeless eternal. Second, however, Maoriland was also a convenient resource of taming threatening images and repressing the material fact of colonization. (Blythe, 1994:32-33)

Within this genre, any ‘trouble in paradise’ was represented as unrelated to outside influences, trouble of the Maori’s own making (Blythe, 1994:23). Practically for filmmakers, this genre then excludes the possibility of
filmmakers themselves, for they would present a contradiction to the premise of the films’ narratives. Ideologically, the absence of outside influence denies the impact of colonialism on native peoples and blames them for their problems. This effectively removes them from history and ‘real life’ where social and historical influences do impact on the lives of the people caught up in the time and place of a ‘real world’. Within the economy of the Manichean allegory, this practice of ‘blaming the victim’ has the effect of restoring a moral balance between colonial settlers, who are absolved from their influence upon Maori within these narratives, and the Maori, who are denigrated through the process of laying the blame for their problems at their own feet. Within these timeless romance films, Maori could then be represented as either noble or ignoble savages, so long as they were represented as culturally isolated and removed from the ‘real-life’ history occupied by Pakeha.

The tourism romance

The construction of a utopian Maoriland was also useful in the promotion of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a tourism destination. As such, representations of an imagined Maoriland were reproduced for marketing purposes, always featuring romanticised images of exotic aboriginal people against the backdrops of unspoilt landscapes. The genre of the tourism romance came into existence to attract international audiences as well as to draw international tourists to Aotearoa/New Zealand. “In that sense, national tourism romances colonize Maoriland for themselves, preserving it within New Zealand” (Blythe, 1994:63).

Unlike the imaginary and fairytale-like timeless romance films, films belonging to the genre of the tourism romance had to create the impression “that there was an actual place ‘out there’ on the imperial periphery to which they could travel as tourists” (Blythe, 1994:22) which was authentically different from the industrialised West. This ‘Myth of Authenticity’ was constructed by imagining Maori in terms of difference - as the ‘real-life’ exotic Other to the Western Self.

Corresponding to the cinematic construction of Maoriland, cultural villages were established to offer a ‘real-life’ Maoriland that tourists could in fact visit. These cultural villages still exist in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand, where one can supposedly step out of history and into the mythical, timeless, eternal world of Maoriland (Blythe, 1994:63). Blythe notes that these cultural villages are, in part, imagined as conservatoires for Maori culture, where Maori culture is assumed to be static and in danger of ‘dying out’. This assumption belongs to the trend of imagining aboriginals as victims of modernity, as was discussed in Chapter Two. This assumption belies the reality of Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where “Maori and mixed Maori/Pakeha
communities were dotted all over New Zealand and they were not dying out by any means, despite periodic epidemics of influenza” (Blythe, 1994:51).

The construction of Maoriland as a utopian synonym for New Zealand, suggests a Pakeha unease with settler belongingness in Aotearoa/New Zealand. “Maoriland implies that British colonists were strangers in a strange land, a Maori land” (Blythe, 1994:18). Hence, although it was a projection of Pakeha desires for a Return to Innocence, it simultaneously embodied a reminder of Maori belongingness in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Pakeha alienation. Maoriland was then both a romantic and an objectionable construct for New Zealand settlers. “As a double figure it was always both New Zealand and not-New Zealand, Maori New Zealanders and Maori rebels, the light and the dark of the Manicheism, Utopia and the Fall” (Blythe, 1994:18).

In terms of the construction of a national narrative, the isolation of Maori within uncorrupted Maoriland in the timeless and tourism romance films as well as in cultural tourism villages, constructs a discourse of Maori/Pakeha separatism, which was contested by the uneasy negotiations of the Integration myth that were played out in the cinematic genre of the historical romance.

The historical romance

This conflicting Pakeha desire to both romanticise and reject Maoriland and Maori, in part accounts for the conflicted nature of the historical romance narratives, which depicted stories of romance between Pakeha and Maori characters, which predominantly ended unhappily. Blythe notes that these stories of interracial romance were by far the most popular narratives in Aotearoa/New Zealand film right up until the 1980s and yet it was only in 1952 that the first happy ending to a historical romance film was produced.

Understood as representing broader social discourses regarding Maori/Pakeha relations and the national identity of Aotearoa/New Zealand, the historical romance films negotiate national dilemmas of how to unite Maori and Pakeha in the years following the land wars. “The racial romance between a Pakeha man and a Maori woman offered a solution to an existential problem, a means to regain Utopia by marrying the foreigners to the natives. But, in ending on a tragic note or, at best, a bitter-sweet one, these films end up reconfirming the original Fall (exile to the colonies) and an insuperable racial divide” (Blythe, 1994:34).

Nonetheless, the dominance of this genre, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, suggests that the dominant understanding among Pakeha filmmakers, which was presumably reflective of a general Pakeha understanding, is that “love between a Pakeha man and a Maori woman is a good idea, even if it is hardly practical at that point in the country’s history” (Blythe, 1994:34).
This simultaneous desire for integration and separation can be understood in terms of Sartre’s explanation of the coloniser’s dependency upon the aboriginal Other for his/her identity and the resulting conflicted desires for the annihilation and multiplication of aboriginal people. In terms of an Aotearoa/New Zealand discourse of nationhood, the historical romance with its narratives of partial integration and its disastrous results, reflects the tension between the competing discourses of integration, bi-culturalism and separatism that are still being played out in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand cinema.

If these films are indicative of the broader socio-political discourses of the time of their release, however, it is interesting that, until the 1970s, historical romance films always matched a Pakeha man with a Maori woman. According to Blythe this trend suggests that “the proper recipe for nation-building was British paternalism and Maori subservience. Britain assumed the stereotypical ‘masculine’ role (the Law, justice, rationality) and the Maori the ‘feminine’ (Nature, the emotions, the irrational)” (1994:41). Here a construction of the alterity of woman in popular myth is re-employed to construct the alterity of the Maori Other through association of Maori with the characteristics that have traditionally been attributed to women in patriarchal society. Understood against a background of British (and British colonial settler) patriarchy, a discourse of Pakeha’s ‘natural’ role as rulers is reinforced by the gender casting of Pakeha and Maori characters in historical romance films. The conflation of ‘Maori’ with ‘feminine’ in these films, serves to normalise marginalisation along one axis of difference through association with another institutionalised marginalisation along another axis of difference.

The Integration myth in these films is one of Maori assimilation into a Pakeha worldview, in much the same way that women would have been expected to leave their families to marry and assimilate into their husbands’ families. This assimilation is represented as the ‘normal’ way forward.

Alongside the historical romance films of unions between Maori and Pakeha characters, however, another strand of historical romance film developed in the 1960s. This was the beginning of a nationalist era that stressed the unity and pride of ‘New Zealanders’ and part of the drive towards building a New Zealand nation was the imagining of a New Zealand cultural essence. This was represented as the “identification between the rugged pragmatic Kiwi and the strange and beautiful landscape ‘he’ has found himself in” (Blythe, 1994:103). In these films, romances between Pakeha men and the Aotearoa/New Zealand landscape were constructed, which is indicative of the dominant discourse of the time that was both patriarchal and Pakeha centred.

Within these films, Maori are marginalised through the emphasis on “the history of New Zealand as the story of a landscape humanized” (Blythe, 1994:100). These stories of Pakeha men and the Aotearoa/New Zealand landscape suggest that the beginning of Aotearoa/New Zealand history was marked by the arrival of
Europeans on Aotearoa soil. By disregarding the significance of pre-Pakeha Aotearoa history, Maori are effectively marginalised in the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand as the less essential or definitive part of the New Zealand nation. This narrative move to eradicate Maori from Aotearoa/New Zealand films and stories can be understood as a symbolic act of Manichean aggression to eradicate the aboriginal Other. It can also be seen as a move to appease a settler anxiety of not belonging and alleviate colonial guilt and responsibility for the unfair treatment of Maori, whilst simultaneously continuing to colonise Aotearoa/New Zealand by simply removing Maori from the landscape and story of New Zealand or at least offering them a less essential role within it.

As an illustration of how the media reflects broader social discourses, and in particular, how the historical romance reflects a Pakeha discourse of New Zealand history and the Maori role in it, Blythe notes that

> the use of the historical romance exactly matches that of the official historians who between the Twenties and the Fifties all but abandoned the Maori at the siege of Parihaka in 1881, aside from a brief mention of their ‘venturesome daring’ in World War I. ... the only history the Maori were to be entitled to was in romantic legends. This has the effect of consigning Maori culture to the past and of leaving the momentum of domination with the Pakeha. (Blythe, 1994:67)

Even within the fictional cinematic narratives of the historical romance genre, Pakeha dominance and centrality is strictly maintained. The interests of the ruling hegemony are further promoted in the political narratives that are constructed in these films, where the only possibility for integration within Aotearoa/New Zealand is represented as being through Maori assimilation into Pakeha New Zealand or the exclusion of Maori altogether. This reconstruction of colonial narratives within popular cinema is a clear illustration of the usefulness of the media in reinforcing dominant discourses that support the interests of the ruling identity group.

The social problem documentary

During the years of World War II, tourism became less of a concern and a driving force behind the production of Aotearoa/New Zealand film. As a result, the genre of tourism romance lost all popularity at this time. In the post-war years of the 1950s, however, the tourism and historical romances reappeared in Aotearoa/New Zealand cinemas with renewed popularity. The development of the newsreel also sowed the seeds for a new genre of filmmaking in the 1950s. The focus on social issues, encouraged by the development of the newsreel as a form of media entertainment, gave birth to the social problem documentary.

This genre came to dominate discussions of contemporary Maori. It reasserted a differential of old and new, where the Maori play catch-up with the Pakeha. No longer was it a question of historical inevitability, as one might find in Rudall
The co-existence of tourism and historical romances alongside social problem documentaries in the popular Aotearoa/New Zealand cinema, suggests the fault line that ran through Aotearoa/New Zealand national mythology even in the 1950s.

Whereas, tourism romance films sought to romanticise Maori and belie the damage done to Maori through the colonisation of Aotearoa, and historical romances mythologised the Integration myth, social problem documentaries drew attention to the Fall of Maori. This genre in the 1950s placed the blame for the depressed condition of Maori people on Maori themselves, thereby avoiding a critique of colonialism. Nonetheless, it drew attention to the carefully manufactured lie of Maori bliss and isolation from history that was produced and reproduced in the imagined Maoriland in films of the timeless, tourism and historical romance genres. The implications of the rise of the social problem documentary in popular Aotearoa/New Zealand media were ultimately detrimental to the Integration myth and the construction of the imagined New Zealand nation as an integrated nation.

Sharp and specifically targeted criticism automatically drives a wedge into the idea of national unity and identity. To stigmatise a ‘problem’ rather than to sing the nation’s praises always draws attention to discrimination, class divisions, complacency in the nation’s bureaucratic apparatus, and the existence of constituencies within the body politic … whose affiliations might be other than the national interest. The existence of the social problem documentary offers tacit recognition that the New Zealand historical romance, with its narrative of progress towards Utopia, always repressed other narratives – for example, the Fall of the Maori (and other potentially divisive constituencies). This latter tragic narrative was, for the time being, offset by the healing powers of the Integration Myth, and there were few signs that the repressed would erupt into presence to plague Pakeha New Zealand as they would in the Eighties. Still, the cracks in the Integration Myth are visible back then in the films where the ‘problem’ is first bluntly acknowledged. (Blythe, 1994:95-96)

Despite the nationalistic attempts of tourism and historical romance to circumvent the ‘Maori problem’ in favour of establishing a tourist friendly and proud Pakeha New Zealand nation, “it was to be the third genre, the pessimistic social problem film, along with its variant, the educational/instructional film, which would persist most strongly into subsequent decades” (Blythe, 1994:100).

The fracturing of the Integration Myth

The narratives of the social problem documentaries about Maori subjects in the 1960s shifted from those of the fifties that offered themes of Maori progress/lack of progress. Instead, they began to suggest essentialist differences between Maori and Pakeha where Maori were imagined as essentially Other and essentially
The dominant Aotearoa/New Zealand cinema of the 1960s represented an understanding that the depressed condition of, particularly urban Maori, was a result of the decay of Maoritanga. In order to arrest this decay, a genre of films about Maori arose in conjunction with the social problem documentary, and these were instructional in nature, with an emphasis placed on reviving traditional Maori lifeways. The material for these instructional documentaries that were aimed at restoring Maori ‘spirit’ was borrowed from previously circulated images of the typical characteristics of Maoriland. This included an assumption that the essence of Maori lies in outward expressions of difference, and particularly in traditional Maori arts and cultural practices. “Maori arts and culture would aspire toward a timeless eternal once again, and spiritual essence would triumph over secular history” (Blythe, 1994:116). Understood as a move back towards ‘Maoriland’, the instructional Maori arts and culture documentaries can be understood as both an assertion of a bi-cultural ethic and a removal of Maori from the ‘real-life’ history of Aotearoa/New Zealand that was left to Pakeha in the nation-building narratives of (Pakeha) man against nature, of the post-war films.

Operating against the collapse of Other/Same binaries, which was promoted with the fostering of the Integration myth, the Manichean division between colonial Self and aboriginal Other was re-established in the 1960s through both the social problem documentaries that emphasised essentialist Maori difference along racist lines and arts and culture documentaries that romanticised essentialist Maori difference. Once again “Maori culture was to be split off from the New Zealand nation” (Blythe, 1994:106) as the essentialist Other to the Pakeha Self. This presented distinct difficulties for the nation-building project that was a priority in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1960s, the problem being "whether Maori art and culture was meant to be decaying or reviving!” (Blythe, 1994:107)

According to the Integration Myth, assimilation is a worthy goal and the collapse of Other/Self distinctions between Maori and Pakeha is desirable in order to attain a united New Zealand nationhood. Within this discourse of New Zealand nation building, the assertion of Maori difference through the promotion of traditional Maori arts and cultural practices is counterproductive to the grand national narrative of united and homogenous nationhood. The assertion of Maoritanga within a narrative of nationhood “meant simultaneously promoting Maori segregation and separation. It could not be otherwise: to stress an inner Maori spirit and essence was also to promote something to which the Pakeha was not privy” (Blythe, 1994:116-117).

The promotion of essentialist assumptions about identity and distinct binaries between Self/Other, Maori/Pakeha in the arts and culture documentaries served to belie the high level of integration and assimilation that had taken place in Aotearoa/New Zealand between Maori and Pakeha people since the
The tension between the Integration myth and the separatist or at least bi-cultural myth implied in the essentialist promotion of Maoritanga through the arts and culture documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s, then locks Maori into the “double bind of the Integration Myth: the Maori must either be identified with the lost past of Maoriland or move into the Promised Land of New Zealand” (Blythe, 1994:63), the promised land not being too rosy for Maori, according to the dominant narratives of the social problem documentaries.

It is no coincidence that at the exact moment when the Myth of Integration became most widely talked about, the beginnings of a new segregationism appeared, based around this notion of cultural decay. This is not the paradox it seems: integration was promoted in equal proportion to the perception of its failure, and Pakeha professionals were tasked with diagnosing where the failure (i.e. decay) had occurred. (Blythe, 1994:106-107)

The pilgrimage genre

The 1980s saw an unprecedented politicisation of Maori that was reflected in the media. The 1984 recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi resulted in subsequent gestures on the government’s part to redress some of the wrongs perpetrated against Maori since 1840. “Maori have won back customary rights to fisheries and resources, and parcels of land have been returned to Maori ownership” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:773). Also in 1984, the controversial publication Maori Sovereignty was released, giving credence to a number of post-colonial Maori perspectives including Awatere’s, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter. Parallel to this politicisation was a growing awareness of Maoritanga, where “the government … increasingly channelled resources towards the ‘flax roots’ of Maoridom, fostering a rapid take-up in the learning of Maori language, a resurgence in interest in Maori arts and crafts and a growing pride in Maoridom” (Harper, Mudd and Whitfield, 1998:773). Heightened Pakeha awareness of Maori grievances and of the less-than-illustrious history of Aotearoa/New Zealand colonisation led to a level of settler guilt, which gave rise to a new media genre that was to take its place alongside the social problem and arts and culture documentaries - the pilgrimage genre.

The pilgrimage genre, according to Blythe, was “the final refuge for a Pakeha liberal humanism which, driven by a guilt complex derived from history, desires to renounce its authority and cede it to the Maori” (1994:130). This post-colonial settler position was identified in 1985 by Michael King in his publication Being Pakeha. King
Blythe explains this process where, “I acknowledge the Other as having an authentic Self grounded in this land (tangata whenua i.e. ‘People of the land’), and once I have acknowledged myself as an Other, my own authentic Self can be imagined” (1994:130).

Within King’s thesis, Pakeha have two schismatic options: to keep silent or to renounce their authenticity as New Zealanders in favour of acknowledging the Maori claim to authenticity within Aotearoa.

The lie of bi-culturalism

Bi-culturalism is, at least in part, a post-colonial move towards re-instating Maoritanga and reclaiming some of what was lost (both materially and culturally) through the colonisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand. It is, however, also a somewhat artificial construction of clear identity boundaries, whereas in the ‘reality’ of contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand identities are in fact not as singular and clear-cut as the promoters of bi-culturalism would have us believe.

For better or worse, New Zealand in the late Eighties became a centrifugal national mythology which is following the American model of mass-mediated pluralism and fragmentation into artificial differences ... Similarly there is a centrifugal expansion of Maori identity and the mythology of Aotearoa taking place ... The irony is that differences are only usually celebrated when they have already been lost – when (Pakeha) New Zealanders and/or Maori have become a more homogenous mixture. (Blythe, 1994:150)

Furthermore, the assertion of bi-culturalism favours the identity boundary between Pakeha and Maori as the definitive identity distinction, which silences other identity claims along other identity axes. For one, it assumes Maori homogeneity, where ‘Maori’ is set up as an identity category against Pakeha. This disguises the hybridity of Maori identities and fails to recognise the diversity of iwi and whanau affiliations.

Blythe’s criticism of Awatere’s thesis of Maori sovereignty (as an example), is that her imagining of a Maori Aotearoa would necessarily fall into the same double bind of the Aotearoa/New Zealand nationhood – the
be integrated into an homogenous Maori identity category or should iwi identity boundaries be maintained? This dilemma is particularly relevant in the light of globalisation and the increasing hybridisation of identities in the postmodern context of contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand, where

as New Zealand becomes increasingly internationalised, the boundaries of the national self expand to embrace the rest of the world – in a reversal of the imperial era (explosion) – and smaller constituencies redefine it to suit their own agendas (implosion). Consequently, the task for Maori intellectuals who wish to redefine the social whole and the Maori place within it remains just as difficult as it has ever been. (Blythe, 1994:258-259)

The project of redefining a Maori place within Aotearoa/New Zealand (whether Aotearoa/New Zealand be integrated, bi-cultural or other), is heavily dependent on the mobilisation of the media for Maori ends. In fact, “media access is seen to be as important in the formation of a continuing Maori identity as the issue of land rights” (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:8). Like other marginalised aboriginal groups Maori recognise the power of the media to construct popular discourses, which in turn have ‘real-life’ socio-political consequences. In acknowledgement of the power of the media, Maori seek greater access to, control of and representation in the media.

Maori access to and control of Aotearoa/New Zealand media

Although Maori have been disproportionately visible in Aotearoa/New Zealand feature films, their roles within these films have been primarily as actors, playing out Pakeha generated narratives of Maori Otherness. The years following World War II and right up until the 1970s saw the Integration Myth constructed in the media. This involved a greater televisual representation of Maori within the kind of mundane roles that McKee proposes as an ideal for Australian Aboriginal representation. Typically, however, Pakeha mediamakers have chosen to incorporate Maori into Pakeha media texts rather than to ignore them, and yet have frequently incorporated Maori representations within separate chapters or sections of a broader representation. This Pakeha representation of Maori reflects a broader political dilemma between Maori integration and segregation: although Pakeha promote the national grand narrative of integration, they have practiced segregation in their media representations of Maori as a distinct category. “In itself this has not been surprising since it reflected the territorial and social distance between the two peoples. However, it also confirms that New Zealand’s national mythology still has a huge fault line running through its official texts” (Blythe, 1994:8-9).
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Regardl ess of whether Maori appear in integrated Maori/Pakeha narratives or in separate and distinct works about Maori, the representation of Maori within Pakeha dominated and controlled media productions, reflects Maori in terms of Pakeha systems, and within the double bind of the Other who must either integrate or fall out of history into the essential timelessness of Maoriland. This integration/appropriation/assimilation/isolation of Maori stands in contrast to the dominant Maori discourse, from the 1970s onwards, of a bi-cultural Aotearoa/New Zealand and a separatist and autonomous Maoridom.

The decay of the Integration Myth in the 1970s resulted in a Maori move towards the development of distinct Maori cultural production. The problem for Maori wishing to represent themselves and a resistant post-colonial discourse in the media, however, is that the forms of media available to Maori are those of Pakeha import. A separatist ethic implies a rejection of Pakeha culture, and with this would be the rejection of television, cinema and other alien media forums. This double bind of desiring to express a counter discourse and yet only having recourse to alien structures through which to express Maoritanga and Maori concerns, is similar to that created by the adoption of the languages of colonisers and colonial settlers by many aboriginal and indigenous groups worldwide. For many, the available means of communicating resistance to colonisation and its effects is only through the use of alien languages which have shaped 'ways of knowing'. This is done by confining the ways in which things are understood within colonial systems of naming, where "to name reality is … to exert power over it, simply because the dominant language becomes the way in which it is known" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1995:283).

So too, film and television 'languages' frame 'reality' and the expression thereof within systems of signs in much the same way that spoken and written languages do, and hence the adoption of film, and particularly well-worn film genres by Maori media producers, presents the same dilemma as that presented by the use of colonial/alien languages to reassert aboriginal 'authenticity'. The separatist ethic of a distinct Maori cultural production is then problematised by the use of both Pakeha language and media forms.

Cowlishaw, however, proposes that aboriginal resistance is indeed possible through the use of colonial systems. She finds the binarism that sees 'resistance' and 'accommodation' as binary opposites to be simplistic (1993:184). It is wrong, she argues, to think of a simple choice between selling out to white culture (a banal Aboriginal identity) and maintaining a resistant, fatal Aboriginal identity which refuses even to engage with white culture. To maintain such oppositions denies the possibility that Aboriginal people can engage and negotiate with white culture while remaining in any way 'Aboriginal'. (McKee, 1997d:202)
Mishra joins in this argument by claiming that aboriginal peoples can appropriate colonial forms for their own use, where “alien discourses may be legitimated as belonging to them as well” (Mishra, 1987). Understood in this way, Maori use of English as well as Pakeha media systems can be seen as a colonisation or appropriation of colonial imports rather than Maori assimilation into Pakeha hegemony. What is important in this appropriation of Pakeha systems of communication, if it is to be empowering to Maori, is Maori control over the way in which formerly Pakeha systems are used. This insistence on Maori control over the representations of Maori in the media and a right to Maori self-expression, has been increasingly emphasised by Maori activists in recent years. Lobby groups such as Te Manu Aute have put forward manifestos which argue for the Maori right to control representations of Maori in the media. According to such lobby groups, “if there is a necessity to represent Maori culture, then it ought to be left to the Maori to do it, not the Pakeha” (Blythe, 1994:277).

The exclusion of Pakeha (and other people who are identified as non-Maori) from representing Maori, however, is a dangerous position to adopt, as it involves decision-making as to who may or may not have access to Maori identity. This position threatens falling into the trap of ‘authenticity’, where prescriptive essentialist definitions of what it means to be Maori fulfil a gate keeping function, limiting the diversity of Maori expression. This is particularly relevant in the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand in which a high degree of inter-racial marriage has taken place, and where access to Maoridom can no longer be a simple matter of ancestral heritage, but has increasingly become a matter of cultural identification. But if Pakeha and other non-Maori media makers should not be prohibited from representing Maori, it is nonetheless useful for Maori to claim greater access to and control of media channels in order to author representations of Maori as Self.

Blythe notes that although the first Maori controlled television and film productions in the 1970s were imitative of Pakeha genres, “the historical narrative of cultural decay and revival has in recent years undergone a spiritual transformation such that Maori culture is once more identified with the timeless eternal” (1994: 261). The danger of this is to lock Maori into the double bind that Cowlishaw suggests is possible to avoid, between either ‘selling out’ or opting for a “fatal” aboriginal identity of a timeless eternal disassociation with the contemporary ‘real-life’ socio-political context of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Tomaselli argues that in a postmodern age, grand narratives are broken down, which creates discursive spaces that can be “mobilized by indigenous communities seeking home-grown interpretations of themselves and their respective places within the world” (Tomaselli, 1999:131). In Aotearoa/New Zealand this fragmentation of grand narratives has involved Maori resistance to Pakeha hegemony within the media, and has seen a re-employment of the media in ways culturally appropriate to Maori.
Whereas Pakeha representations of Maori have historically threatened Maori tapu, Meadows comments on how the appropriation of video, in particular, has in some cases been used as an emancipatory tool for Maori who return captured images to Maori iwi.

This not only recognises sanctions or tapus placed on certain knowledge, but also returns control of that information to its owners ... The gesture of returning control of the images to their owners, he (Barclay) explains, is culturally important as are notions that Maori film and video makers should not take pictures, they should be given them by the community. (Meadows, 1994)

Although within a bicultural Aotearoa/New Zealand, Maori representing themselves for Maori audiences is of great importance in building Maori pride and unity, the contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand is becoming multicultural and post-modern in the sense described by Frederic Jameson and Jean-Francois Lyotard whereby identities are constantly being contested and atomized. On the one hand there are constant incitements to assert one’s identity (Maori, Pakeha, feminist, individualist); on the other, it is constantly being neutralized by daily experience of life in an enormous and diffuse social system. (Blythe, 1994:258)

Nonetheless, Blythe makes the point that identities (be they complex, multiple and changing) are just as important in a postmodern world as they have ever been and race still plays a pivotal role in defining the identity of Self, and against that, of defining the Other. This point is clear for Maori, as race is “still used as a basis for oppression by the Pakeha, and no amount of post-modern atomisation of identities has managed to change that as the 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Waitangi came and went” (Blythe, 1994:258-259). Therefore, despite the complexity of definitions of Self and Other and the large-scale collapse of the distinction between the two along the Maori/Pakeha identity axis, “Maori identity will continue to be asserted in the attempts to redefine the social whole to suit Maori aspirations” (Blythe, 1994:259). Maori access to and control of mainstream Aotearoa/New Zealand media channels is therefore useful, not only in building a separatist Maori identity, but also for negotiating a more central position within the mainstream media of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Despite the former hegemony of Aotearoa/New Zealand media as largely Pakeha cultural production, there is also a growing infiltration of Maori influence in Pakeha media productions as well as much development in Maori media production. Maori have been largely successful in increasing their media profile, with an

10 Tapu is the “commitment to the tribe expressed through observance of structural restrictions: the sacred state or condition in which a person, place, or thing is set aside by dedication to the gods and thereby removed from profane use” (www.creativenz.govt.nz/artsnz/taonga.pdf).
The enormous popularity of *Once Were Warriors* on the domestic market, suggests that this film keys into something sensitive to a more general Aotearoa/New Zealand psyche or ‘political unconscious’. Baddily and Sheehan suggest, however, that Aotearoa/New Zealand audiences “could be divided loosely into two camps: those who had no idea that these problems ever existed, and those who were thankful to see their reality
represented on screen at last (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:8), where for many Maori this reality had become increasingly impoverished by 1994.

According to Drummond, since 1984, Aotearoa/New Zealand underwent large-scale economic restructuring, resulting in increased unemployment and a decline in income in all sectors of the population except for the very rich. This, in turn, resulted in an increase in crime, drug use and violence (especially against women and children). Furthermore, the pressures of migrant labour and unemployment resulted in a dislocation of working families and an increase in the number of families living together in one home. Health risks rose and public health services were ill-equipped to deal with the demands placed upon them. “New Zealand statistics clearly show the severe effects of these changes on the Maori population” (Drummond, 1996:41).

Released in 1994 in the wake of the Maori political activism of the 1980s and the subsequent Maori drive towards a bi-cultural Aotearoa/New Zealand coupled with the exacerbating deterioration of living conditions for many Maori since 1984, Once Were Warriors taps into a bi-cultural discourse and constructs a post-colonial narrative of Maori ‘revival’ and a return to a glorified Maori past.

The harsh critique of deracinated urban Maori and the representation of the depressed social conditions in which many urban Maori now live, following more than one and a half centuries of gradual colonisation and neo-colonial usurpation of Aotearoa/New Zealand by Pakeha settlers, constructs a political narrative of post-colonial resistance and a vision of a future Maori Aotearoa with a renewed sense of Maoritanga. In constructing this vision of a separate Maori space within Aotearoa/New Zealand, however, Once Were Warriors enters into the double bind discussed earlier in this chapter.

An overview

Once Were Warriors tells the story of the Heke family who live in an urban ghetto council house. Jake is a violent patriarch who loses his job early in the film and is complacent in his acceptance of a life on the dole. He spends his time with his yob friends, getting drunk in the local pub and throwing parties at his home. He is an explosive bully and the film contains deeply disturbing scenes of Jake brutally beating his wife, Beth.

Beth tries to protect her five children and keep her family together, but is ineffective in doing so. She also indulges in excessive drinking and smoking and is attached to Jake despite the threat he poses to her and their family.
Nig, the oldest child is involved with a Maori gang and has very little attachment to his nuclear family. Boogie has frequent run-ins with the law and is removed from his parents care and taken into welfare custody and placed in a Maori boys’ home. The two youngest children do not play a driving role in the film’s narrative but provide a symbol of hope for the future of the Heke family. They are looked after primarily by their sister, Grace, who is a good-natured teenage girl who tries to keep the Heke family together.

Grace nurtures her siblings, as well as her best friend Toot, and it is Grace who goes with Boogie to his court hearing and it is she who feeds her siblings and cleans up the smashed house after her parents’ drunken parties. She is also the tragic sacrifice in the film. She is raped by her father’s friend, Uncle Bully during a party at the Hekes’ house. This event is the catalyst that causes Grace to commit suicide. Grace’s suicide is a necessary sacrifice within the film’s narrative, as it is this event that leads Beth to eventually reject Jake and the lifestyle of which she has been a part, and to return to her whanau with her family.

The film centres around Beth who makes the journey from her culturally and personally impoverished condition towards political consciousness and a renewed pride in Maoritanga. As the film unfolds, the audience learns that Beth broke Maori tribal law by marrying Jake who was from a different iwi and was a descendant of a long line of slaves. In doing so she rejected her iwi and became culturally disconnected and isolated in urban Aotearoa/New Zealand. In turn she has been unable to offer her children a sense of their cultural identity. It is only at the end of the film that Beth returns to her whanau and takes her children back with her. This return to ‘Maoridom’, which is represented as something like the Maoriland of early colonial films about Maori, is represented within the film as a redemptive move to reclaim Maori identity and pride.

Beth’s journey is a coming to consciousness, which involves

a process of social development which Harriot Bradley (1996:27) describes as three levels of social identity: passive, active, and politicised. At the passive level, for sixteen years she accepts the status quo in her battered marriage, with a sense of disconnectedness from Wainui Pa, her place of origin. But after this time, she shifts towards another level of her social identity, internalising growing awareness of discrepancies in her environment to achieve the active level. The third, politicised level of Beth’s identity follows her rejection of the imposed Pakeha status quo and marks the beginning of the process of reconstructing her personal identity, her construction of self as a unique individual and her social identity, within a new framework, by locating herself more firmly within her whanau and hapu. (Drummond, 1996:45)

Beth’s development of her political identity is stronger in Duff”s novel in which she returns to the ghetto to help other disconnected and impoverished Maori.
By contrast, in the film, after Grace's funeral, we see not the local community, but the family one: Beth with her children, even Nig and Toot, together and happy, bidding a fond farewell to her aunt, who suggests a visit to the ancestral home. The film's Beth is a woman who finds her community in her own bloodstream, with none of the wider consequences hinted at by the novel. (Gipson, 1997)

Placing *Once Were Warriors* within the ‘family drama’ genre of filmmaking to which I believe it belongs, the less political nature of the film can be understood in terms of generic conventions. Within a family drama it is typical to focus more on the personal lives, relationships and private dilemmas of individual characters than to tell the stories of political activism and public change.

Although Beth is perhaps less overtly politically active, in the film she does take Toot into her care, thus extending her field of influence beyond her own family. She does not choose to stay in her former urban environment, however, but rather returns to Wainui Pa. Despite being less politically driven in the film, by returning to her roots she retains “an important element of Maori tradition by seeking support from her relatives and Paramount Chief Te Tupaea” (Drummond, 1996:46), which in itself is an assertion of a political position – Maori pride and a separatist understanding of a Maori space.

But if in the film, Beth is not overtly political (like she is in the novel), the film in its entirety offers a clear political message. With an understanding that ‘the personal is political’, Beth’s situation can be understood as reflective of broader social conditions. Her personal decisions to empower herself and her family, to leave Jake and the depressed state of their urban lives and to reinforce her Maori identity through her return to her whanau and Maori cultural lifeways, can be understood within the film narrative as a construction of a broader political statement about the potentially redemptive rewards of Maori ‘returning’ to a separate Maori Aotearoa. Understanding the power of films to construct broader social discourses; Brown and Tamahori may have sacrificed Beth’s political narrative within the film for the power of the political narrative of the film as a whole.

**The post-colonial dilemma of belongingness as addressed in *Once Were Warriors***

The theme of belongingness and finding ‘family’ and ‘home’ is central to *Once Were Warriors*. According to Murphy: “Son of a Maori father, Tamahori brought unimpeachable empathy to the ‘homeless’ Maori in *Warriors* – homeless not in the sense of being out on the street, but rather, existentially. The Heke family, the film’s fulcrum, cannot shelter either is own members or its transplanted tribe of friends” (1997:26).
Through the course of the film, Beth and her children move away from an understanding of their nuclear family and council house as their family and home. Instead they find new identifications with other people and groups of people who are able to fulfil the crucial existential function of telling them who they are. This process of self-definition with assistance from others is not a process of projecting alterity onto an Other in *Once Were Warriors*. Instead, it is a discovery of others who are like them, who are also Self and who can reinforce their identities through a mirroring process of showing them their culture through similarities rather than differences.

Jeffery Weeks links identity to belonging, what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. For Beth Heke, her sense of belonging is threatened from the base when she found herself in an urban environment, away from her extended family, away from Wainui Pa, the village she was raised in. Beth's violation of tribal law, marrying Jake, who was descended from a family of slaves, meant that they had to leave. In this sense she was disconnected from the social fabric which had given her support and strength, a strong sense of belonging. (Drummond, 1996:45)

The journey Beth takes to rediscover her sense of belonging for herself and her children takes place through her return to her Maori roots and through solidarity with other Maori. *Once Were Warriors* has thus “become a powerful media symbol of Maori family life in contemporary New Zealand urban society. It is powerful because as a medium it addresses Donna Awatere’s (Ngati Porou/Whakaue) vision of Maori sovereignty to redesign this country’s institutions from a Maori point of view. The institution in question here is the Maori family” (Drummond, 1996:39).

The idea of a home being a place where one can find cultural sustenance, and a family as a group of people who offer spiritual nourishment, is symbolically referenced throughout the film. Tamahori uses symbols and the cinematic device of juxtaposition in order to drive home the contrast between his definition of family and home and the popular definition of a family as a genetic family and home being where people live. The most overt reference to the central message of the film’s narrative is through Grace’s telling of a symbolic story within the film.

Grace’s story that she tells to Toot and to her younger siblings functions as a symbol of the film’s suggestion that Maori need Maori solidarity and cultural nourishment in order to survive in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In turn, as Grace’s story provides cultural nourishment for the Maori in the film and suggests that Maori need to support each other, *Once Were Warriors* fulfils this function for Maori in the broader Aotearoa/New Zealand context. It does this by reinforcing through the full film’s narrative, the message of Maori solidarity that is only subtly implied in Grace’s short story.
Grace tells the story of the tullefly, an imaginary sea creature who took care of a greenstone wall that prevented water from flooding over the people who lived near the lake. Grace tells that every month the people would bring the tullefly a piece of greenstone to help her maintain the wall.

Greenstone (pounamu) is strongly associated with Maoritanga in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as it is traditionally a preferred material for use in Maori arts and crafts. As such, the greenstone wall can be read as a symbol of Maori solidarity and the strength of Maoritanga in preventing the further neo-colonisation of Aotearoa/New Zealand by Pakeha and the affects of colonisation and the deracination of Maori ‘flooding over’ Maori people.

Grace explains to her younger sibling that a tullefly is “a creature that looks after people” and Grace herself is presumably a tullefly in the film, as she tries to protect her family and Toot. Unlike the tullefly in her story who receives support from the people who live near the lake, however, Grace does not receive support from the people who live in the urban ghetto in which she lives. Her story then performs the function of a prophesy (as used in ancient Greek tragedy), where an early warning of the tragic events that are to follow in the film is given and ignored. For Grace, the lack of support that she suffers eventually leads to her suicide.

Significantly, Beth’s whanau is later seen to live next to a lake and assumingly they represent the people who do help the tullefly to maintain the greenstone wall. When Beth and her children return to their whanau, they do enjoy the support of the whanau and pride in Maoritanga. Earlier in the film, however, the Heke family look at Wainui Pa from the other side of the lake, and symbolically from the other side of the greenstone wall, where the Hekes have been incorporated into urban New Zealand, as opposed to Maori Aotearoa.

Like in an ancient Greek tragedy, the warning prophesies are marked repeatedly along the path to the Heke family’s eventual tragedy. Grace’s story of the tullefly gives an early warning of Grace’s need for support. So too, in the scene in which the Hekes look at Wainui Pa from the other side of the lake, Grace says that she would love to go and visit her ancestors. She appears to mean that she would like to visit the burial ground, but Beth answers by saying “not before me you don’t”, implying that Grace is suggesting she visit their ancestors in death. Retrospectively, this scene can be read as a hint at Grace’s immanent death and a warning against the dire consequences of not maintaining the greenstone wall through communal caring and support.
Beth and her children have made the journey to the ‘other’ side, back to their roots in Wainui Pa to claim their ‘authentic’ Maori identities as Self, and it is at Grace’s funeral that Beth tells the story of why she left Wainui Pa. She tells of how the chief warned her not to marry Jake and how she broke tribal law in doing so. Telling her story in the third person Beth says, “her father said she’d be back, that when everything went to hell, she’d be back”. At this point in the film everything has gone to hell and she is back and the words of Beth’s father function as the earliest forgotten prophesy of the family’s tragedy.

The seeds of the film’s tragedy are understood to have been planted by Beth’s rejection of her Maori roots and community, before Grace was even born. This story is then much like the inevitable disasters of the ancient Greek style when the sins of the father (or in this case – mother) are paid for by generations to come in super-sized genealogical tragedies resulting from disturbances of the ‘natural order of things’. These epic tragedies typically symbolise broader issues, where one family comes to represent an entire society. So too, Once Were Warriors offers a critique of the deracination of Maori people in post-colonial Aotearoa/New Zealand and a promise of the redemptive potential of reconstructing Maori sovereignty and solidarity in isolated Aotearoa.

Cultural alienation and the demolition of the greenstone wall

Tamahori comments on Maori and their space within Aotearoa/New Zealand, claiming that:

The Maori have a very strong place in New Zealand society, they always have. They are very closely connected with the land, very spiritual (like most indigenous peoples), very tied to intangible things unlike Europeans. Their place now, however, is one of an industrialized society, and one of a kind of alienation, which is what our film is about. There’s a growing number of disenfranchised Maori who are losing touch with their own culture and society in general. Maori now constitute a large portion of the prison population and there’s a lot of anti-social problems creeping in -- welfare dependency, unemployment, alcoholism. (Tamahori interviewed by Gillard, 1996)

The issue of cultural alienation and homelessness is central to Tamahori’s post-colonial critique in Once Were Warriors that reflects his concern about the deracination of urban Maori. He illustrates this issue through his construction of the Heke family and home. He constructs this home as an unsuitable home environment for the upbringing of a future generation of proud Maori.

Near the beginning of the film, Tamahori establishes that the Heke house is not a nourishing environment. The scene in which Grace tells the story of the tullefly is immediately followed by Beth’s entry into the house. She has been grocery shopping and at first glance embodies a popular symbol of nurturing – a mother providing food for her children. This symbol is immediately debunked, however, as Beth lights up a cigarette and cracks
In case we do not get it the first time, the sequence of setting up an expectation and then undermining it, is repeated. The scene cuts back to Grace with her younger siblings, explaining that a tullefly is a creature that looks after people. This moment is interrupted by the arrival of Jake, the children’s father and the traditional symbol of the provider. He shouts out: “Where the fuck is everyone?” This harsh and ineloquent outburst summons the children inside to share a meal, but the audience soon discovers that the food he has brought back for his family is in fact not a symbol of his ability to provide and care for his family, but rather his inability to do so, as the seafood is revealed as a consolation gift for him having been laid off work.

In these couple of minutes of screen time, Tamahori effectively signifies that all is not well in the Heke house. The two people responsible for creating a healthy, nourishing and caring environment provide an unhealthy, harsh and incommunicative one with none of the security and nourishing elements that by the end of the film’s narrative Tamahori establishes as necessary in an effective home.

Tamahori extends the nourishment metaphor to relate to the cultural malnourishment of Maori in an urban environment. He makes the point that much of what is offered as nourishment within this environment is culturally foreign and un-nourishing. As an example, the scene of the morning after the drunken party shows that the Heke house has been trashed and Jake’s friends have eaten almost all of the food in the house. All that is left for the young Heke children to feed on is a greasy cardboard box of leftover Chinese food.

Where food and physical nourishment is repeatedly associated with spiritual and cultural nourishment, the leftover Chinese food can be read as a symbol of the Heke children’s cultural malnourishment, where whatever culture is passed on to them is second-hand and foreign to their Maori roots and as a result cannot nourish them spiritually by performing the existential function of telling them who they are.

So too, the urban Maori in the film all speak English. Only Beth has retained a limited ability to communicate in reo Maori and significantly, it is with the use of reo Maori that she is able to call her family to help her and to prepare for Grace’s burial.

Music is also used in the film to emphasise this point about the cultural alienation of urban Maori, where Jake and his friends listen to American ballads and the scenes of Nig and Boogie are accompanied by rap music, typical of American ghettos and Hollywood movies about American gangsterism. By contrast, traditional Maori music quietly accompanies scenes that depict the characters’ coming to Maori cultural consciousness. By the
The culturally foreign music, whereas Boogie finds his strength and cultural sustenance in singing traditional Maori songs at Grace’s funeral.

Beth and her children cannot find protection, support or nourishment (either physical or spiritual/cultural) in their rented urban ‘home’. The greenstone wall is not in place for the Heke family. The flimsy protection of the prefabricated walls and the wire fence between the Heke house and the freeway, proves ineffective in protecting the Hekes against the heterogeneous affects of the outside world along with the corruption and grime of the urban ghetto that comes flooding into their home with increasingly disastrous effects as the film progresses.

Beth cannot find protection within the home because it is within the Heke house that she is brutally abused – beaten and raped - by Jake. The children hear Jake beating Beth and are shown quaking in their beds, insecure because they fear that the family who should be protecting them are instead a threat to them. This fear is realised when, like Beth, young Grace is raped within her home by ‘Uncle Bully’ - someone who identifies himself as surrogate family.

The journey home

Although Beth’s journey towards a renewed Maori pride and solidarity is the central journey within the film, Beth’s children begin this journey long before Beth, causing a rupture in the nuclear family, as the children pull away to find other more nurturing ‘families’ that can offer them cultural sustenance and a sense of their own identities as Maori.

It is not only Jake who finds ‘family’ with his friends, outside of his nuclear family. The oldest son Nig leaves the family home to join a Maori gang called Toa (meaning ‘warrior’) who initiate him by beating him up and then tattooing him with traditional Maori moko. After Nig is beaten up, the gang leader says to him: “Bro’ now you’ve met your new family”. Here again Tamahori throws into question what a family is. The Toa (warriors) are as violent as Jake and his drunken mates, but their violence is controlled and disciplined, although arguably senseless. By the end of the film, the gang is constructed as a legitimate home for Maori, where the gang members offer Nig support by lending him their car and helping with Grace’s funeral. Beth even tells Nig that his mates did him proud, thereby offering him her approval of his new found Maori family or tribe.

Boogie (Beth and Jake’s teenage son) also finds a new home and family. Boogie has frequent run-ins with the law and is taken away by welfare and placed in a Maori boys’ home where he learns the haka and Maori
In a few important scenes, Tamahori reveals how Boogie regains a sense of pride in his Maori-ness and how this pride and knowledge of Maori culture and traditions gives him strength. The first is that in which Boogie insults his Maori guardian in the welfare home, saying “Let me go you black bastard” to which Bennett responds by saying: “We are the same colour, Boy.” Following this exchange in which Boogie’s shame at being Maori is revealed, Bennett teaches Boogie about Maori combat and begins Boogie’s training in Maori traditions that will eventually instil in him a sense of pride.

Bennett shows Boogie how to use the taiaha (a Maori hand-to-hand combat weapon). He tells Boogie: “The British used to think that the bayonet was the most lethal of all hand-to-hand combat weapons, until they came across our warriors who fought with the taiaha. You think your fist is your weapon? When I have taught you, your mind will be. You’ll carry your taiaha inside you”.

In this speech he redresses Boogie’s negative impression of Maori history and reclaims some Maori pride over and against a Pakeha Other by claiming that the Maori weapons were better than those used by the colonising British. Beyond this though, he suggests that learning how to use the taiaha will be a far greater weapon for Boogie than his fists. This is not because it does more physical harm than fists but because of its value in reinforcing Boogie’s mind by culturally enriching him through engaging him with Maori past, traditions and communal ways of doing things. At the end of this scene, Boogie and his Maori guardian walk off with their arms around one another, having accepted each other as family. Later, Boogie will be seen further strengthening his mind and Maori spirit by learning the haka in which he reaches up to the heavens and symbolically pulls the lands and waita of the ancestors into his body to give him strength and courage.

For both Nig and Boogie, their surrogate families perform the existential function of instilling in them a sense of Self. For Nig, this is achieved through his obtaining belongingness. His Maori pride that he gains through association with his Maori gang is visually displayed in his moko (tattoos) and the Toa jacket that he wears. Boogie learns pride through reconnecting with a proud Maori past and by drawing strength from Maori ancestors and the passed on Maori culture and traditions. By the end of the film, both are proudly Maori and the two brothers connect on a more intimate familial level than we have seen them connect before. Boogie compliments Nig on his moko and Nig responds by asking Boogie if he would like one, to which Boogie replies, “No thanks. I wear mine on the inside”. This conversation in which they call each other bro’, is a recognition of their oneness and Maori pride.
Grace also finds another family in her friend Toot. But Toot is himself without a home or family and is poorly equipped to give Grace the cultural sustenance that she needs. Although he loves her, he can do little more to ease her worries than offer her marijuana and the glimmer of hope of leaving the ghetto one day when they are old enough to go on the dole.

As much as Boogie’s surrogate family teaches Boogie pride, Toot teaches Grace to lose, as this is all that he himself, (as a homeless and illiterate boy) knows. Grace, lacking the cultural nourishment and support that she needs from her family and surrogate family, sustains herself through her own imaginary creations that take form in her writing. Grace acts as family for Toot as well as trying to provide the support that her siblings and mother require by offering cultural sustenance through the stories that she writes and tells.

She thus becomes a present-day repository and transmitter of culture. It is significant that when Grace visits Toot (who lives in the shell of a car, a now-derelict Pakeha artefact), she brings him two types of nourishment. First is a packet of kai moana (mussels culled from Jake’s appeasory gift when he loses his job) to feed his body; secondly her story which is cultural/spiritual nourishment for his soul. Toot is unable to read so she tells him the story that she has made up. (McDonnell, 1994:4)

Her stories are an assertion of her own identity and are a cultural construction. It is her book of stories that is her protection against the harsh reality of her depressed social condition and the impoverished sense of Maori Self she sees in the society around her. “Later, when she sees her mother’s bruises, Grace clutches her story book against herself as a kind of defensive reflex. At the film’s end too, this book reveals Uncle Bully’s crime against her: its redemptive power thus survives her death” (McDonnell, 1994:4-5).

But if Grace created ‘home’ for her siblings and Toot, it was only through her death that they were able to make the real journey back to their roots to find a more stable and enduring Maori home in Wainui Pa.

Grace’s suicide jolts Beth into a new understanding and by the end of the film, Beth has come to realise that a home is something more than a council house where people live together. With this new understanding, she makes plans to take Grace back to Wainui Pa to be buried with her extended family in their whanau’s burial ground. Jake wakes up to discover Beth leaving with the two youngest children and the following dialogue takes place:

Jake: What the fuck’s going on here?
Beth: I want to take Grace back home to the mudhai.
Jake: This is her fucking home.
Beth: No it’s not. This was never her home. Never.
Jake: And that fucking place is? Fucking Maori who think they're better than the rest of us. I hate them! Bastards living in the fucking past.

Beth: It's our past too Jake.

Jake: What's that supposed to mean?

Beth: I want Grace to be with her people. We should have gone back a long time ago.

This scene highlights Beth’s final understanding of the importance of roots and cultural identity and Maori solidarity. It is primarily with Beth, as the central character of the film, that audiences identify and it is therefore her realisations that cue audiences into the film’s broader discourse of the importance of Maori solidarity. It is at the end of the film, however, that the theme of finding a Maori ‘home’ and ‘family’ is at its very clearest.

Beth discovers that the reason why Grace committed suicide is because Uncle Bully raped Grace. Beth tears into the pub to confront him. Jake’s other friend tries to diffuse the situation and cast doubt over Beth’s accusations by saying “We’re family”. Yet they are a far cry from the supportive and nourishing families we have seen through the course of the film in the guise of Beth’s extended family, Boogie’s welfare home, Grace’s caring and Nig’s gang’s solidarity. These socially depressed, drunken and violent layabouts are Duff, Brown and Tamahori’s scathing representations of deracinated urban Maori in the wake of Pakeha colonisation and Maori disenfranchisement, estranged from Maoritanga, against which the proud examples of Maori in solidarity stand in contrast.

Leaving the pub and Jake and the life Beth has known before in urban Aotearoa/New Zealand, Beth says to Jake: “I’ve found something better Jake and I’m going to make damn sure my kids have it all. From now on I make the decisions for my family”, to which Jake replies: “Fuck off then! You’ll get nothing from me”. Beth then makes the most overtly political speech in the film: “You’ve got nothing I want. Our people once were warriors, but not like you Jake. They were people with mana, pride, people with spirit. I my spirit can survive living with you for eighteen years then I can survive anything. Maybe you taught me that”.

Shot from a low angle and backlit, producing a glowing halo effect, this shot of Beth in close up is conventionally framed to suggest stature and the moral high ground. She is leaving her nuclear ‘family’ as she knew it before, for belongingness in a communal Maori ‘family’. This is reinforced by the final moments of the film in which Beth and her children and Toot drive off and the youngest boy asks where they are going and Beth says: “We’re going home”. In contrast to the atmosphere of familial warmth and unity in the crowded car, the scene cuts to an extreme long shot from a high angle of Jake, alone in the car park, shouting threats and curses after the car before sitting on the pavement in resignation as the sirens of police cars draw nearer and the credits roll to the sounds of the harsh chords of an electric guitar.
Standing alone

The final juxtaposition of the car full of people who care for each other, heading off to a new more promising future, set against the image of Jake alone, angry and desperate and estranged from his blood relatives as well as his surrogate family of ex-friends (since he has just severely beaten Uncle Bully); reinforces the film’s central message of the importance of Maori unity and solidarity. The concepts of home and family are worked out through the film’s narrative to make this point, but the frequent argument for and against the individual’s need for support from others is also recurrently debated in Once Were Warriors.

In the scene of the morning after Beth has been beaten up by Jake, Beth has not been able to attend Boogie’s court hearing and her friend Mavis comes to visit her. Beth expresses her concern that she was not there to support Boogie and Mavis says that he must learn to stand on his own. It is Nig’s involvement with the Toa gang that worries Mavis. To her it is far more dangerous to be a part of a gang than not to have any support at all. Jake’s attitude towards the news that Boogie has been taken away by welfare, supports this idea. He thinks it will be good for Boogie because it will toughen him up. Later when Jake cancels their family trip to visit Boogie he makes the excuse that it is a bad idea to visit Boogie because they will spoil him and he needs to toughen up.

Jake says the same thing of Nig when he sees him in the pub and notices Nig’s tattoos: “Boy, you’re too much! You wanna be like your old man eh – learn to stand on your own two feet”. But Nig does not want to be like Jake and he replies that he does not have an ‘old man’. It is with the solidarity of the Toa gang that Nig finds his pride and strength and Maori identity.

This belief in the value of standing alone shows a lack of care and nurturing in the family home as well as in the community. It is exactly this uncaring attitude and lack of support that sees Beth beaten up by Jake as their friends leave their house without stopping him, and which eventually leads to the film’s cataclysmic event - Grace’s suicide.

Jake’s belief in the futility of nurturing their children takes its toll on Grace especially, as is evident in the film’s narrative at the point when she most needs support. She runs out of the house the day after she has been raped, but when Beth tries to follow her Jake stops her by saying: “Oh leave the kid alone. That’s your problem - you spoil the lot of them. No wonder they’re all so fucking screwed up”. To this Beth replies: “It’s got nothing
You chased Nig off, you couldn’t give a damn about Boogie. You’re not going to hurt my babies anymore, not while I can do something about it”.

Beth’s realisation that she needs to protect and nurture her children more, comes too late to save Grace but it is this realisation that her children and she herself needs support, that leads her to return to Wainui Pa to seek the solidarity of her extended family later on in the narrative.

Grace’s lonely suicide is a hard warning of the consequences of having to stand alone and not having other people to offer support. Her story of the tulipfly and her own actions throughout the film as the care-giver within the family and broader community, provide the antithesis to the individualistic stance adopted by Jake and his culturally alienated mates.

It is not accidental that the first glimpse the audience has of Grace is of her sitting beneath the only tree in their yard, sharing her story with her siblings. The tree is a typical signifier of ‘roots’ as well as of ‘family trees’. Furthermore it is the site at which Grace shares her stories, and as such it offers a symbol of potential cultural protection and familial solidarity for the Heke family. “Lovely young Grace and the moving magic of her fictions might have been consecrated as both communal tent pole and cultural vehicle for her Maori family. But her tree comes instead to grow in Biblical significance, from linchpin of a small patch of paradise to Grace’s ultimate cross” (Murphy, 1997:27).

Grace is found, near the end of the film, hanging from the same tree under which she is seen sitting at the beginning of the film. The promise of finding roots and solidarity, as offered by the symbol of the tree in the Heke yard, is thus broken. But, through Grace’s death, Grace’s mother and siblings eventually recognise the necessity of supporting each other, and it is at her funeral that Beth and Nig both tell her that they wish they had been there for her.

It is significant that whereas the Heke family tree hanged Grace, an actual totem pole that stands by the Maori meetinghouse where Grace’s funeral takes place does in fact represent roots and solidarity and it does symbolise the strength and communal support that Beth and her children find in Wainui Pa. Whereas Beth and the children mourn Grace’s death together alongside the totem pole, Jake chops down the tree in the yard in an act of impotent rage at Grace’s suicide. Whereas Beth and her children accept the nurturing and support of the Maori solidarity they find in Beth’s whanau, Jake rejects Maoritanga and is ultimately represented as lost and alone by the end of the film.
What is interesting about the discourse of unity and solidarity in *Once Were Warriors* is that it constructs boundaries around who can and cannot be included in the ‘family’ of belongingness and communal support, and those identity boundaries are drawn very clearly along racial lines. Who the Maori characters need in the film are other Maori. The identity category of Maori, however, is somewhat simplistically defined in the film, where Pakeha are excluded and the high degree of inter-racial mixing that Tamahori, in interviews about Aotearoa/New Zealand, himself attests to, is disguised within the film’s narrative. The film then promotes a separatist discourse that extends beyond the widely accepted tenets of bi-culturalism which, like those of multiculturalism, suggest ‘unity in diversity’. Instead, a distinct binary divide is established between Self and Other, Maori and Pakeha in *Once Were Warriors* with the implicit promotion of a separate and exclusive Maori space within Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The low profile of Pakeha in *Once Were Warriors* suggests this separatist discourse. Besides the police, lawyers, judge and welfare representatives at Boogie’s court hearing, there are no Pakeha characters at all and certainly none that play any central or driving role in the film’s narrative. As an extension of the idea of Maori sovereignty, *Once Were Warriors*’ narrative is a construction of a Maori narrative for Maori and by Maori in which Pakeha have very little space, which is a narrative representation of the separatist Aotearoa as imagined by political activists such as Awatere, where “white people of any generation have no business being in this country” (quoted in Blythe, 1994:150).

This belief is reflected by the Maori characters in the film as well. An obvious example is the scene in which the Pakeha police bring Boogie back to his home. Grace has been telling her young siblings the story of the tullefly and her young brother asks Beth of the woman police officer: “Is she a tullefly Mom?” to which Beth replies that she is not, implying that the Pakeha police are not creatures who look after people, at least not Maori people. The young boy is then seen chasing the police out of the yard, pretending to shoot them with a toy gun. Here the hostility of Maori towards Pakeha authority and control is represented and the younger generation of Maori are shown as being no more sympathetic to Pakeha dominance than the older generation are. This signifies that the ‘colonial problem’ will not simply go away with time. The answer given to this ‘problem’ in *Once Were Warriors* is one of essentialist separatism, where the possibility of integration is completely ruled out of the question.
This disillusionment with the Integration Myth is illustrated particularly clearly in the scene in which Grace smokes marijuana with Toot in the old wrecked car:

Grace: Why’s everything so black, Toot?
Toot: I dunno. Maybe because we’re all bloody marys.

They then smoke a joint and the scene cuts back to them again later:

Toot: What colours are you seeing now, Grace? Still all black?

In this scene Grace alludes to the fact that for Maori, life is a far cry from that of Pakeha mythology. The All Black symbol of New Zealand nationalism is irrelevant to and unrepresentative of Grace’s reality. She, as a Maori woman, is marginalised within this grand narrative of a largely Pakeha male nationalism, which finds perhaps its greatest symbol of national pride in the All Black rugby team. The mythology of rainbows, which suggests stories of hope and dreams, also does not appear to include Grace’s reality. For her, this mythology does not apply to black (Maori) people.

Awatere asserts that “all efforts at biculturalism have only resulted in integration and assimilation, bitterness and tears. No more” (Quoted in Blythe, 1994:150), and for Grace this seems to be true, where the Integration myth appears to her to be a lie that does not include her or offer her the cultural identification and nourishment that she requires.

By defining her reality along racial lines and expressing her alienation from broader New Zealand narratives of integration and nationalism, Grace identifies herSelf primarily along a Maori/Pakeha identity fault line. This essentialist understanding of herSelf as Maori and as separate and different from Other New Zealanders, and her rejection of the national New Zealand Integration myth, seems to imply an endorsement of a separatist discourse of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

**Identity binaries in *Once Were Warriors***

The symbol of the greenstone wall in Grace’s story further suggests the neat identity boundaries that are constructed in *Once Were Warriors* in accordance with a separatist discourse, where on the one side of the wall is Pakeha New Zealand and on the other is Maori Aotearoa. Within the film’s broader narrative, however,
The urban environment in which the Hekes live is represented as a corruption of Maori lifeways. The greenstone wall is then not only a divide between Maori and Pakeha but also between urban and rural, where Beth’s journey back to her whanau is a move away from urban New Zealand and back to a separate and isolated Maoriland. These sharp, clear distinctions between Maori/Pakeha, Aotearoa/New Zealand, rural/urban are visually constructed in the film.

The opening image is perhaps the most overt reference to the binary opposition between the land of Maori Innocence before the Fall, and that of fallen Maori in urban New Zealand. A romantic image is shown of rural Aotearoa/New Zealand with rolling hills and soft light that is reminiscent of images of Maoriland from the timeless and tourism romance genres. The camera pans, however, to reveal the rural scene to be a picture on a huge advertisement billboard, advertising New Zealand tourism. “Once Were Warriors … begins its ideological work of consciously stripping away the mythologizing veneer of pre-existing New Zealand films” (McDonnell, 1994:11). Beneath the billboard, a freeway, a low-cost housing development, burnt out cars and the urban grime of a poverty-stricken ghetto are revealed. “At first this moment is speaking ironically about the constraints of urban life and the hollowness of the New Zealand dream. However, once the film has wound forward and laid out its emotional path, the poster ends up being about hope” (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:9), where the romantic rural image comes to represent Maoriland and Maoriland is constructed as the ‘true home’ of Maori.

The threat of urban reality to Maori and particularly to the Heke family is further suggested in the opening title sequence. As the camera pulls back to reveal the urban setting, we see the Heke house across the freeway and separated from the freeway by a thin wire fence. In the yard, Grace sits under the only tree in the yard and indeed in the entire neighbourhood, with her two younger siblings, reading them a story. Here the wall that should keep the family safe from unwanted external influences is extremely fragile. The only hint of a romantic rural Maoriland is the single tree in the yard, under which the three children try to find shade and cultural nourishment through Grace’s story. This tree is eventually chopped down by Jake.

Once Were Warriors ultimately says that an urban lifestyle is a kind of corruption for some Maori people … Urban life becomes a trick for Jake’s wife, Beth (Rena Owen). It makes her vulnerable. The city is just a thin mantle on the land, as thin as the paper of the poster. In Jake’s violent rages he breaks the house apart from the inside. It is a false life, prefabricated and easily destroyed, not rooted in a sustaining cultural heritage. (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:9)

The symbolic significance of the thin and unstable council house in which the Heke’s live lies in the suggestion that this house within urban New Zealand is not the true home of Maori. “In this settlement of friends, the Heke
The alienation that comes from belonging to neither world” (Ellis, 1994) - neither Pakeha New Zealand nor Maori Aotearoa.

Beth, in a conversation with Jake after she discovers that he has lost his job, stresses her desire for a home of their own. She is not happy in the rented house that has been provided at low cost by the New Zealand (largely Pakeha) government. She wants a permanent and stable home of her own. This desire can be understood as being representative of Beth’s need for her own cultural ‘home’ as well. This desire corresponds with that of Awatere’s call for Maori sovereignty. That an authentic Maori space is constructed in Once Were Warriors as an isolated rural environment, however, is somewhat problematic. It traps Maori within the double bind discussed earlier in this chapter, where Maori can either return to an imagined past state of Maori rural isolation or be corrupted by contemporary Pakeha dominated New Zealand, in which according to this film, Maori live in depressed ghettos.

Nig’s involvement in the Toa gang, which is represented as a loyal albeit violent family, and Boogie’s discovery of his cultural identity in the boys’ welfare home, does offer some hope that Maori can find authentic Maori identities within urban New Zealand. But, their journeys of discovery and self-definition as Maori nonetheless take place in separatist Maori environments. Boogie’s renewed pride and confidence as Maori rests on his accumulation of understanding of Maori traditions that he gains in an all-Maori boys’ home, and Nig’s Maori pride is fostered within a Maori gang who are seen constructing barbed wire fences around their gang territory in an act symbolic of constructing identity boundaries. These boundaries of belongingness are reinforced by visual indicators, where Toa members undergo initiation ceremonies and wear tattoos and labelled jackets, thus constructing clear identity indicators of a Maori Self against an external Other.

At the end of the film, however, Nig and Boogie and the other Heke children all return to Wainui Pa together, thus suggesting that it is still in rural Aotearoa that Maori find their authentic home and identities as Self.

Although the essentialism of an urban/rural, Pakeha/Maori binary association is slightly rocked by the representations of proud urban Maoridom, the discourse of separatism is nonetheless maintained. Boundaries between Maori Self and the Other are fiercely guarded within the film’s narrative and the ultimate ‘home’ of Maori is constructed as rural Aotearoa, an imagined reconstruction of Maoriland, which in the film is represented as the isolated village of Wainui Pa. This narrative of a return to Innocence, recognises the double-bind of bi-culturalism and does not side-step it but rather promotes the option of atavism and isolation.
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within an essentialist Maori Aotearoa as a feasible option, where returning to an isolated rural village is represented as desirable for the Maori characters in the film.11

Tribalism and warrior mythology

Although Wainui Pa is established as the ideal place of Maori Innocence before the Fall, most of the film takes place in urban Aotearoa/New Zealand, highlighting the realities of Maori existence in New Zealand after the Fall of colonisation.

Director Lee Tamahori sets up his story as one far removed from a perhaps-mythic past, and defined by a warrior culture in a land where the war for survival is fought against less tangible enemies. Often poor and treated with disdain by white authority figures, the Maori turn their aggression inward, in pointless and explosive barroom brawls and domestic violence. (Null, 1999)

This concept of what it is to be a warrior is played out in the film through various contrasts between Jake’s ‘corrupted’ warrior identity and the ‘authentic’ warrior identity of Maori past, and living through Maori cultural traditions into a Maori present. The Toa gang is obviously represented as a modern day warrior tribe, where Toa is Maori for ‘warrior’. Boogie’s learning of traditional Maori fighting techniques and the haka (a traditional Maori war cry) offers the second modern day example. “We are thus presented with an emphatic difference between what are in the film’s terms the real warriors (the boys), and the bogus warriors (the older guys who are forever telling each other anecdotes about who they have beaten up and who they have outstared, etc.)” (McDonnell, 1994:7). The difference between the two is that Jake and his bully friends have no sense of their Maori identity and no pride in being Maori. They fight other Maori and see themselves as ‘standing alone’ against other individuals. The Toa gang, by contrast, stand together with one united Maori cultural identity against an imagined Other outside of the Toa ‘family’.

“Both Hekes, estranged father and son, are acting out dreams of tribalism; but Jake fancies himself as freestanding tentpole, while Nig is literally embraced, body and soul, by patterns of pride and identity within his street clan” (Murphy, 1997:27). Boogie too, learns old Maori warring traditions and in his training Bennett (the

Comment [...] Page: 228 Should this be ‘is’?

The narrative decision for Beth and her children to return to Wainui Pa can also be read in terms of the cinematic convention of the happy ending, where the troubled characters retreat to a safe utopian place. This is a Hollywood-type resolution to the film that avoids the complex renegotiating of the urban sphere that Duff’s novel undertakes, but which offers audiences an element of feel-good entertainment which may have been deemed necessary at the conclusion of a very hard hitting cinematic experience. Understood in terms of these generic dictates, the decision for the film to end in this way may be understood less as a politically motivated choice and more as a choice motivated by market demands.
warriors and British weapons, thus establishing the Other as colonial Pakeha against a united Maori Self.

Within the central narrative of the film that highlights the need for Maori unity and solidarity, this contrast between fighting between individuals and Maori unity against an external Other, makes sense. The contrast suggests the proud benefits of unity versus the alienating consequences of standing alone. Warriors have also historically been involved in protecting tribal boundaries and identities, which is also what the maintenance of the greenstone wall does, and this is constructed as a worthy pursuit within the logic of the film’s bi-cultural discourse.

Establishing any form of warrior-ship (‘authentic’ or not) as an ideal to which Maori should strive, however, is a problematic move in that it marginalises women within the broader narrative of Maori identity that it promotes, where women have not historically played any significant role in war narratives. Furthermore, the glorification of a warrior identity undermines the anti-violence logic that is implicit in the scenes of wife-bashing and rape, which serve to repulse audiences and beg sympathy for the victims of the violence, and judgement of its perpetrators.

**Gender issues in Once Were Warriors**

The violent scenes of rape and wife beating are the most shocking and disturbing scenes in the film. These scenes generated much discussion in the wake of the film’s release and as a result, for many, the film’s ‘meaning’ has been distilled into a single comment about woman abuse. Undoubtedly, the oppressed condition in which many Maori women exist is a major concern within the film, but the representation of woman abuse is set against a broader socio-political backdrop of cultural and spiritual decay.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that the current material conditions of Maori women need to be seen not only against the background of colonisation but also against the construction, via various manifestations of the state, of Maori women as an oppressed social and economic group. Partly due to the impact of colonisation, this underclass is also the result of governmental policies leasing to long-term unemployment and poverty for marginalized groups. (Drummond, 1996:41)

If films have the political power to enlighten and change public opinion and hence public policy, as I believe they do, the representation of the depressed conditions of Maori women in Once Were Warriors is of great significance. Particularly when, as has been argued earlier in this chapter, Pakeha audiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand are largely unaware of the realities facing Maori, Tamahori’s unflinching depiction of issues facing
The social inequities under which Maori women suffer in contemporary urban Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Awatere argues it is harder for Maori to get jobs, and for Maori women to get good health care; they are also in greater danger of rape, physical assault, emotional abuse and sexism. Maori women who are unable to adapt find themselves in psychiatric hospitals and prisons. There is a disproportionately greater percentage of Maori women committed to these institutions. (Drummond, 1996:45)

Maori women face double oppression - along both racial and gender lines. Typically, those who suffer the most abuse are also those who inflict the most abuse. So, the oppressed classes turn on the weak within their own class and in turn oppress them. This is not to say that Pakeha women and wealthy women are not also abused and that the issue of women abuse is not relevant to broader understandings, but that this form of abuse is particularly rife amongst oppressed classes of people, and that in Aotearoa/New Zealand Maori people have formed an oppressed underclass.

For Baddily and Sheehan, *Once Were Warriors* “emphasises the violent spirit of humiliated men and the wounded spirit of the women and children who live with them” (1995:9).

The humiliation of Jake within *Once Were Warriors* is clearly established, where Jake comes from a long line of slaves. Beth is a princess and her family did not think Jake was good enough for her. “He recalls courting Beth as a younger man and being treated as a slave by her family. He has consequently come to believe in the meritocracy of the fist: his status and title as ‘Jake the Muss’ is earned by his fighting prowess, not by his birth” (McDonnell, 1994:9).

Jake clearly has a large sized chip on his shoulder, which is exacerbated by the loss of his job and hence his earning potential early in the film’s narrative. Baddily and Sheehan’s understanding is that it is Jake’s humiliation that causes him to lash out against those who are physically weaker than him. His brute strength is his only feature that earns him any respect in the tough environment of the urban ghetto in which they live and where respect is not earned, obedience is commanded by means of physical violence.

Beth’s strength comes from a deeper sense of her own identity that, despite her rejection of her whanau, is nonetheless rooted in, at least the memory of, her Maori culture and her strong sense of Self as a princess within her tribe. Jake has none of this cultural pride. He is “a Maori who hates Maori. His existence explains how racist structures can end up making one hate oneself. He is twisted inside out by self-loathing that is then
displaced as hatred towards women” (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:9). For Baddily and Sheehan then, “the film is about the emotional dysfunction that comes from structural, endemic cultural repression” (1995:9).

This “structural endemic cultural repression” locks the women in the film into cycles of violence, where their oppressed condition is understood to be inevitable. Young Grace is seen mirroring the role of victim that her mother has played. It is Grace who cleans up the smashed house and who feeds her siblings after Jake and his friends have trashed the place the night before. Nig comments to Grace that she will have to clean up after plenty of drunken parties when she’s married and this belief in the inevitability of Grace’s role as subservient is echoed later in the film by Jake who warns: “You’ll end up like your fucking mother here”. It is again reiterated by Beth when Jake has let them down again by getting drunk in the pub instead of taking the family to visit Boogie. Grace complains and Beth answers: “It’s just a woman’s lot, that’s all. One day you’ll understand”. In case it isn’t clear enough what role women play in the film’s Maori urban slum, Mavis spells it out for us: “You know the rules girl: Keep your mouth shut and your legs open”.

But if Beth is prepared to accept the conditions of her life as slave and punching bag for Jake, Grace is not willing to follow suit. The tragedy for Grace, however, is the only way out of the cycle of abuse in which she finds herself, appears to be through suicide. It is only after Grace has killed herself that Beth reaches full consciousness of her situation and reaches an active and later political realisation of the possibility of change.

Beth eventually triumphs over Jake, however, leaving him for a more rewarding life in which she intends to make the decisions for her family. Her move from the passive to the active phase of her consciousness, as explained by Harriot Bradley (Quoted in Drummond, 1996:45), involves her decision to take control over her own life and to resist the abuse and oppression inflicted on her by Jake. In doing so “Beth effectively expels the patriarch and creates a mother-centred family unit with herself as its rightful head. The film’s scriptwriter and producer thus tap into certain social developments which both validate solo parenting and empower women to kick out abusive husbands or partners” (McDonnell, 1994:10).

Beth’s triumph is a political narrative of women asserting their rights. This narrative represents the possibility for abused women to break the cycles of violence in which they find themselves victims. But, this narrative is, in my opinion, flawed.

Beth rejects Jake but then returns to her family home. Beth’s retreat to a rural environment offers a potentially disempowering message of Maori women’s inability to survive in tougher public spaces. Instead of proposing the encouraging narrative of women’s empowerment and politicisation that Duff’s novel suggests, where Beth returns to her urban home to change the face of that patriarchal environment, the film offers a narrative of
Furthermore, by returning to Wainui Pa, Beth fulfils the prophesy of her father that she would return. This narrative then reinforces the patriarchal idea that a woman must either belong in her husband’s home or in her father’s. Furthermore, Beth dispels Jake as the patriarch in her family, but “Jake is … replaced in a sense by his son Nig, who steps between him and Beth in the final pub confrontation to defend his mother and to Oedipally usurp his father in the family power set-up” (McDonnell, 1994:10). Nig escorts Beth from the pub and drives the family away in ‘his’ (his gang’s) car.

Although Once Were Warriors is critical of the violence and brutishness of Jake and his drunken friends, it is less critical of the general male-centred climate of urban Aotearoa/New Zealand, where the Toa gang is represented as violent and yet as a proud and legitimate modern-day whanau. “As a result of this presentation of the gang, I tend to disagree with the commonly held interpretive view that patriarchy is soundly defeated at the conclusion of Once Were Warriors, because the machismo of the gang and their fights is so clearly valorised. It is only the posturing of the older males in the pub that is criticised” (McDonnell, 1994:4).

No woman-friendly alternative is imagined for Maori society in an urban context. Therefore, although the scene of Beth returning to her family community driven in the Toa gang’s car by her gangster son Nig reinforces the discourse of Maori solidarity, I believe it simultaneously serves to undermine the film’s narrative of woman’s liberation, or at least an urban woman’s liberation.

Realism or Racism?

The representation of rape and wife-beating among other atrocities in the film’s Maori urban ghetto, resulted in much controversial discussion regarding the predominantly negative way in which many of the Maori characters are portrayed in the film.

When the film was released it had the reviewer from Te Maori News asking, ‘why such a film should be made, and what motivated the actors in the film to be part of something that seemed so negative and portrayed Maori in such a bad light. I wondered where in the world this film might be screened and what sort of images and messages it would send to oversees audiences about Maori people. But what I had to come to grips with by the end of the movie, was that what I was watching was a portrayal of reality. The hideous barrage of events depicted in the movie are disturbing, but they do happen in real life, and the difficulty is in confronting that reality.’ (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:8)

This dilemma for Maori audiences as to whether they should celebrate or castigate Once Were Warriors is reported again and again in reviews of this film written by Maori critics. David Matthews comments:
One of the things I find most disturbing about *Warriors* is the familiarity of the Heke family – they could easily have been a part of my own extended whanau – and I believe that this shock of recognition partially accounts for the film’s success; as Maori we were able to see some of the tragic consequences of our urbanization and assimilation into European society and culture; as a nation we were confronted with many of the pressing social problems affecting our indigenous population. (Matthews, 2000)

Matthews goes on to caution that “while it is true that these problems exist, once immortalised on celluloid certain narratives take on a life of their own, and I believe it is possible that Maori may be associated with this negative image for years to come” (Matthews, 2000).

“Unfortunately, because there are so few films about Maori culture, and so few films by Maori, it makes every Maori film both entrusted and burdened with a responsibility” (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:9). As I have commented earlier, non-Maori Aotearoa/New Zealand audiences are largely unaware of the Maori realities represented in *Once Were Warriors*, and contemporary Maori identity has a relatively low profile on the international media market. Therefore, individual films with the success that *Once Were Warriors* enjoyed, are capable of constructing Maori identity within the globalised media sphere. But of course, a single film is not capable of representing the ‘reality’ of all Maori and as a narrative film about one family within one urban community, it does not claim to do so, although it may make broader comments about the redemptive potential of Maori sovereignty and isolation within Aotearoa.

But although it does not and cannot represent ‘reality’ for all Maori, *Once Were Warriors* does construct a ‘realistic’ portrayal of lives similar to at least some Maori people, and having been made by a largely Maori creative team it meets the mandate of Maori representations – of Maori by Maori. As such, *Once Were Warriors* has been acclaimed, by some, for ‘putting Maori on the map’, which may reflect an encouraging openness of international audiences to Maori media representations.

One would hope that the film’s success with its New Zealand audience indicates the consolidation of changes in attitudes towards funding across the board. The sole purpose of the recently created Maori funding body, Te Mangai Paho, an autonomous organisation, is the facilitation of Maori broadcasting for the promotion of Maori language and culture. Contemporary Maori dramas have been few and far between. Hopefully Tamahori’s *Once Were Warriors* has increased the chances of seeing more. (Baddily and Sheehan, 1995:8)
Once Were Warriors, Alan Duff’s sociological epic of Maori despair, is—besides powerful, visceral—almost a grab-bag of postcoloniality; it touches on issues of translation, gender and power roles, traditional versus modern culture, media influence on culture, conflict of ideology, and, of course, is rooted in a current socio-political context of a once-colonized land, New Zealand. (Gipson, 1997)

The representation of the socio-political context of modern-day Aotearoa/New Zealand in *Once Were Warriors* offers an implicit critique of colonisation and neo-colonialism, where the effects of colonisation are marked on the Maori characters in the film and the conditions in which they live. The placement of the Maori characters within a depressed urban environment in *Once Were Warriors*, in which they acutely feel the effects of ‘real-life’ socio-political conditions, is a rebuttal to the long tradition of timeless, tourism and historical romance films in Aotearoa/New Zealand that placed Maori in timeless Maoriland as, predominantly happy noble savages. The characters in *Once Were Warriors* are not happy and are, more often than not, not noble either, but most importantly, they are not timeless. In this film, Maori very much occupy the domain of hard reality in a contemporary (1994) urban Aotearoa/New Zealand context. Maori are not removed from the time and space occupied by the rest of New Zealand citizens, and although the film’s discourse is one of a separatist Aotearoa/New Zealand, the affects of the broader Aotearoa/New Zealand colonial history are strongly felt in the film. In this way, *Once Were Warriors* clearly asserts Maori identity as fluid and affected by history and politics.

Furthermore, in this film the potential for social and political action and change is expressed through Beth’s journey towards an active and then a political consciousness that results in her return to her roots in order to find a new way forward. This (personal and political) activism belies well-worn Pakeha discourses of Darwinian racial determinism, where Maori were imagined as essentially inferior and incapable of change. This narrative of action for change stands in opposition to colonial justifications of aboriginal subjugation that rely on the discourses of essentialism and the timelessness of aboriginal identity for their support.

Despite representing a diversity of Maori realities and attitudes and reflecting a story of personal growth and political change in Beth, the film simultaneously reinforces essentialist understandings of Maori, where the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ Maori is still imagined to be rural and isolated ‘traditional’ Maori. The argument here is not that Maori are incapable of change but rather that change is undesirable and that integration into Pakeha New
The narrative of a willing move ‘back’ to an isolated and rural Maoriland is typical of a post-industrial anxiety and corresponding desire for a return to a state of Innocence before the Fall, but it also involves a move to reconstruct distinct identity boundaries between Self and Other. Within the logic of bi-culturalism, this boundary is between an imagined Maori Self in Aotearoa and the Pakeha Other of New Zealand. Within the film, race is identified as the key signifier of identity. Tamahori constructs the large-scale assimilation of Maori people into Pakeha lifeways as a corruption of an essentialist Maoritanga. Within this narrative, however, the large-scale cross-racial breeding and integration that has taken place within Aotearoa/New Zealand and the resulting complexity of many people’s racial identities is overlooked in the clear Self/Other, Maori/Pakeha, Aotearoa/New Zealand identity boundary constructions within Once Were Warriors.

In constructing these boundaries, however, the differences between Maori and groups of Maori are collapsed into an imagined single and unified identity, which is itself a co-option of the diverse Maori identities that make up the broader identity category of ‘Maori’. Tamahori attempts to side-step this dilemma by making reference to the tribal differences between various Maori within the film’s narrative (Jake is a slave and Beth is a princess), but he finds himself on the inevitable slippery slope of the separatist discourse, where Maori identity is further fractured into smaller identity groups and Beth is eventually only able to find support and authenticity within her own whanau. The logical end to this process of defining the identity of Self against Others is an extreme individualism, where each individual is Self to all Others. This understanding of identity, of course then undermines the other central claims that are made within the film, such as the need for Maori community, unity and solidarity and the belief that one cannot stand alone but must find support in the caring and oneness of Maori others.

**Final words on Once were Warriors**

As argued in the first section of this chapter, postcolonial debates about identity operate within the contested space between the discourses of integration and segregation and identities are defined in relation to the identities of Other, where the Self can be understood inclusively (in terms of similarities) or exclusively (in terms of difference).
The central issues that are played out within *Once Were Warriors* of forging an authentic Maori space and identity within the postcolonial society of Aotearoa/New Zealand, are typical concerns within the body of criticism that can be labelled post-colonialism. The discourse of bi-culturalism which this film corroborates, however, locks Maori into the double bind, earlier discussed, where Maori must either be co-opted into Pakeha New Zealand or be removed from the socio-political society of contemporary New Zealand in an act of ‘fatal’ atavism. Tamahori’s representation of a ‘return to Innocence’ through the narrative of Beth and her children returning to the isolated and rural village of Wanui Pa (as a kind of romanticised Maoriland), is then a narrative acceptance of bi-cultural essentialism and an assertion of a distinct Maori Self against a remote and distinct Other.
CONCLUSION

Within this dissertation I have attempted to make some sense of the typical ways in which aboriginal peoples have been dominantly represented within post/neo-colonial nations, and more specifically within Australian, South African and Aotearoa/New Zealand cinema. Although aboriginal cultures are undeniably vastly heterogeneous, the representation of aboriginality, particularly by colonialists and colonial settlers within colonial and neo/post-colonial contexts, has displayed a level of uniformity. This uniformity is explained in terms of the economy of the Manichean allegory, in accordance with which the colonial relationship and the social arrangements and tensions that the event of colonisation has subsequently given rise to in neo/post-colonial nations, is reflected in media constructions of aboriginal peoples by non-aboriginal settlers in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa as Other.

I have taken care to explain that media constructions of the aboriginal Other are not “essays on authenticity and inauthenticity so much as allegories of cultural engagement” (Blythe, 1994:10), where representations of the Other are more reflective of the psychology and discourses of the media makers than of the people they pretend to represent. The various diverse and even contradictory trends in representing aboriginality that have emerged and which have been discussed in the body of this dissertation, can be understood in terms of this logic, where according to the economy of the Manichean allegory, representations of the Other do not circulate because of their truthfulness but because of their usefulness.

“My point then, is that the imperialist is not fixated on specific images or stereotypes of the Other but rather on the affective benefits proffered by the Manichean allegory, which generates the various stereotypes” (JanMohamed, 1995:21).

Similarities in the trends of representing aboriginality in South Africa, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand by settler media makers can then be explained in terms of similarities in the colonial relationship and the position of the colonial settler culture within these three countries. Responding to similar needs, desires, anxieties and insecurities, Australian, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South African settlers have typically constructed the aboriginal Other according to a limited number of stereotypical imaginings, as have been discussed and explored in some detail through the course of this dissertation and which have been loosely categorised in terms of the standard commodities put forward by Said.
My exploration of these dominant trends in the representations of aboriginality within Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australian and South African cinema is founded on an understanding of the power of films as political artefacts, where films both reflect discourses that are circulating within a society, and construct discourses through the generation of cinematic myths about the society they supposedly represent. Understood as politically powerful tools of popular socialisation, my discussion of the representation of aboriginality within South African, Australian and Aotearoa/New Zealand media has then extended to an exploration of concerns regarding the ethics of representing real-life subject peoples and a suggested ‘best practice’ for this endeavour. It also addresses how aboriginal peoples might appropriate media channels to generate oppositional discourses regarding aboriginality, where aboriginal people are positioned not as Other but as Self within cinematic narratives. Furthermore, with the understanding that films generate a society’s myths about itself and hence provide an important sphere in which to negotiate a nation’s identity, the political discourses that colonial and neo/post-colonial representations of aboriginality both reflect and construct have been examined in this dissertation, with particular emphasis on the representation and construction of the politics of colonialism, neo-colonialism and/or post-colonialism through the manipulation of standard ways of representing aboriginal peoples within neo/post-colonial societies.

Corresponding to my generalised discussion of some of the most dominant trends in the representation of aboriginal people as Other (and sometimes as Self), I have included a discussion of three films – The Great Dance, The Last Wave and Once Were Warriors - to further highlight my arguments. Although in isolation these films cannot be indicative of an entire history of filmmaking about aboriginal subject peoples and cannot offer examples of all of the key trends in the representation of aboriginal subject peoples, the films were chosen to reflect at least some of the key discussions of the representation of aboriginality contained in this dissertation.

Following JanMohamed, “I have implicitly treated the texts as expressions of the nexus of economic, political, and social factors that define their colonial context, which, in spite of local variations, displays a fundamental structural uniformity consisting of the Manichean opposition between subject and object, self and other, white and black” (1983:263). In this way, The Great Dance, The Last Wave and Once Were Warriors have been used to illustrate the political power of cinema, where “at the core of the colonial relationship, as T.O. Ranger declares, is “the successful manipulation and control of symbols” (Ranger, 1975:166)” (McDougall, 1995:339).

Illustrative of ‘films as political artefacts’, The Great Dance and The Last Wave both offer excellent examples of films that reflect the desires and anxieties of settler filmmakers, whereas Once Were Warriors is a good
Within this dissertation, these three films have been “inspected as symptomatic and indicative (or otherwise) of an underlying logic of cultural power relations where ‘culture’ is understood to mean a series of often interchangeable distinctions between self and other, Western and others, colonisers and indigenous, modern and traditional, authentic and synthetic” (Mickler, 1998:55-56).

The representations of aboriginal peoples within The Great Dance, The Last Wave and Once Were Warriors have thus been analysed in terms of the discourses of cultural power relations of which the representations/constructions of aboriginality as Other/Self in the three films, are indicative. In terms of the economy of the Manichean allegory, the films’ discourses are understood to have been constructed in response to tensions in the psyches of the filmmakers, which are, in turn, indicative of a ‘collective unconscious’ or broader social discourse circulating within the society in which the films were made. As such, each of these films, like all films, offer a microcosmic reflection of broader social tensions within a society and the identity negotiations and tensions within it.

In the light of this thesis, it can be concluded that the Other (and indeed the Self) is never given but constructed through a Manichean process of identity construction. “Aboriginality’, therefore, is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’” (Langton quoted in Mickler, 1998:55).
APPENDIX

AN INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG FOSTER

Regrettably, most of the tape recordings of this interview were inaudible, and as a result only a rough account of the conversation has been transcribed with direct quotations included wherever possible. This account of the interview has been checked and approved by Craig Foster to be an honest reflection of his views and opinions, as expressed on 16 November 2002.

My first impressions of meeting Craig Foster involved surprise at his youthfulness and his remarkably relaxed attitude. He is accommodating and open to discussion regarding his film, and indeed encourages open debate about the issues that concern me. He requested a copy of the questions I would like to ask him in advance of our meeting as well as some further detail regarding the angle of my dissertation and the context in which his comments will likely appear. He has made some notes and is very generous with his time, granting me three hours on a beautiful Saturday morning.

We meet at his home in Claremont, Cape Town and begin with some casual conversation about filmmaking in Cape Town and regarding his personal journey towards becoming a filmmaker. He is encouraging to me as a prospective filmmaker and even offers me assistance in realising my ambitions. We then move onto the topic of *The Great Dance* and his experiences in the central Kalahari filming the !Xo San. He immediately becomes more animated and is clearly passionate about this topic and genuinely concerned for the community he speaks of.

Before we settle down to address the questions I have prepared, Craig talks at some length about what he calls the San’s ‘twin consciousness’ and the “shamanic aspects that make up San hunting”. He is eager for me to understand that unlike the rational episteme of the West, the San (like many other aboriginal and non-Western communities) occupy two realms of consciousness: the everyday state of ‘normal’ interaction and an altered state that takes place in a sacred context and is a central part of the San’s spiritual life. He tells me that “that altered state is more powerful than our reality as we know it”. For him the film is not about hunting as we understand this word within the western context but is about the relationship that the San share with animals as well as the spiritual world of the !Xo community and hunting’s role within it.

In our discussion of the context of my discussion of *The Great Dance*, we discuss Other/Self binaries and the long tradition of Western filmmakers representing aboriginal people as Other. Craig makes the point that it is we (the West) who are Other to a San Self, because it is we who have deviated from our past ways of living (as hunter-gatherers) and of understanding (through twin consciousness). Our Western exclusion of a second realm of consciousness is for Craig counter to the way in which we have been ‘programmed’.

We’re still designed as hunter-gatherers. You can’t get around that because for 99% of our time as humans here on Earth, that’s what we have done. Our human design, our minds, bodies and spirit have not had time to change to anything other than hunter-gatherers. So, at least people can identify, simply because that’s our background. We have in such a short period changed our lifestyle very radically. We now feel that we’re far away from that, where in actual time, it’s yesterday.

Craig notes that Western critics are often out of touch with this second realm of consciousness - our only experiences of altered states often being meaningless engagements with alcohol or drug usage. It is this twin consciousness and the everyday occupation of altered states that Craig most wants his audience to understand. He says: “We are looking at this from a single, rational, one-dimensional mind-set, and they are not. They are not. They have a twin-consciousness. They are looking at things in a different way and that’s the way of the human being. That’s how we are designed. We may be different now, but that’s our design. It’s very difficult to argue against that”
tells me that we are all capable of accessing altered states and occupying a twin consciousness. Craig tells me that we have been hunters and gatherers for most of our history as homo sapiens and have through thousands of years, entered altered states as a part of our spiritual engagements. It is only since the agricultural revolution and the beginning of sedentary societies that we have ceased to operate as hunter-gatherers, and there are now only a few people left who live in this way. “If you look at history, we are the first civilisation (Western civilisation) that does not have access to altered states within a sacred context” (Craig Foster). But, we cannot so quickly forget the ways of our past and for this reason, Craig tells me, many Western audiences as well as San audiences have identified with the spiritual aspect of the hunt represented in The Great Dance.

On the other hand, Craig notes that many Western critics disbelieve his representation of the San’s altered states and are sceptical that the San hunters indeed possess the level of skill depicted in the film.

You cannot actually capture on film the complexity of tracking, of the understanding of their environment. It’s impossible. And unless you’ve actually been with them it would seem that one is romanticising it, but I can assure you that it’s actually the opposite. That’s the nightmare of this debate, that it seems that it’s so mystical and so extraordinary, but they are perceiving a phenomenal amount. That’s the way it is.

Craig goes to some lengths to assure me that the skills represented in the film are in no way exaggerated but are rather underplayed, as the 75-minute film could not represent the full complexity of their hunting practice and its spiritual significance. I believe him. I also believe him when he tells me that it was important to the San peoples themselves that he represent their skills as hunter-gatherers, particularly in the light of their dire inferiority complex as a result of their dispossessed political and economic status in Botswana and their popularly imagined identity as second-rate citizens.

Craig tells me that it was important to the San people that he represent something in their culture for which they could feel pride and that their renowned skill as hunters offered them this pride in identifying themselves as San. “I think its perhaps because their identities have been so hammered they want to hold onto something that is San” (Craig Foster). Subsequent to the release of the film, Craig notes that San people have unanimously applauded the film and have felt a renewed sense of their cultural identity and an affirmation of this identity. He reports that “they particularly enjoyed the complex imagery that showed their skills as sophisticated. Hunting can easily be seen as stereotypical San portrayal, but for me I hope that we can break this stereotype by showing hunting in a new light”.

Craig notes that the hunt means so much more to the San than a means to obtain food, that it is a spiritual practice that is sacred and also bears existential value where their hunting expertise is for many San peoples a proud signifier of San-ness. It is in the light of the sacred significance of hunting for the San that Craig feels the revoking of hunting licences is a dire human rights violation. I offer the parallel that has been vigorously debated in recent media of whether Rastafarians should be able to smoke marijuana as part of their religious and spiritual practices. Craig claims that the situation is worse for the San because although smoking marijuana is illegal for all South African citizens, other people are able to hunt the animals in the wildlife reserves that the San may not. Craig says that this is like “cutting off an artist’s fingers” as the Botswanan government is stripping away their cultural identity and inhibiting the spiritual life of this community by banning them from hunting.

I am sceptical that, given the choice, the San peoples would prefer to live as hunter-gatherers than to be politically and economically empowered in the broader South African and Botswanan societies. I ask Craig whether he thinks that the !Xo people would rather have access to their former hunting grounds or would prefer to live a luxurious city life. We discuss this point for a while and Craig tells me that the !Xo hunters that he worked with are ill at ease in the city. He agrees that this is probably because they are unaccustomed to that environment and that the !Xo (and most San peoples) would like better jobs, more money and the freedom and empowerment that that would bring. Craig claims however, that even then, San people would
It is for this reason that Craig finds the suggestion that carcasses be delivered to San peoples, unsatisfactory. He notes that if hunting were only a means to obtaining food, the San hunters would not waste the amount of time that they do on the hunt. He tells me that their arrows seem to be deliberately small and that less poison is used on the arrow heads than could be used, in order to “give the game a fair chance”. Craig asserts that the hunt is itself a dance and an activity in which the San find pleasure and fulfilment. He explains: “All I am saying is that any San who still feel hunting is important should have some access to hunting, even if it’s for a short period every year. I don’t know what actual percentage of San would still find this important, but I can say that the vast majority of the small rural groups that I have worked with do find it very important”.

At this point I ask about the level of San reliance on hunting for their nutritional requirements and Craig tells me that their kills form only a small part of their diet (where San peoples hunt at all). Most San peoples buy their food from the small wages that they receive from selling crafts or from working on government projects. He tells me that meat is their favourite food though, and especially big animals. For the San, bigger animals have a greater spiritual significance than small animals, and the Eland is the greatest animal that they hunt because of its spiritual significance and the spiritual nourishment the San obtain from eating it.

I ask Craig why these other San realities have not been shown in The Great Dance and he tells me that it was dangerous for them to go into the villages because if government or wildlife authorities discovered that they were making a film with the San, they would be in risk of going to jail. He tells me that the conditions under which they made the film were extremely risky and very tense and that they shot in the Kalahari to avoid being detected. He goes on to say that even the hunters’ wives were unable to watch the film in its finished state because they live in a sedentary San village and it would have been too dangerous to show the film there. He says that the !Xo people themselves were cautious about what they would and wouldn’t allow the Fosters to put into the film, and statements that were considered too risky were retracted and certain things were not shown on the request of the !Xo hunters themselves.

I am interested in learning more about the process of filmmaking which Craig and Damon Foster undertook. I ask him how he came to the decision to make a film about the !Xo community and particularly about their hunting practices. I am trying to discover what in particular interested them in hunting specifically, rather than any other element of San culture. Craig tells me that their executive producer approached them with the proposal to make a film about hunting and that they agreed. From that point, the !Xo community was singled out for investigation because they heard that they still hunted by running and that some of the most skilled San hunters belonged to this community. Craig tells me that the film is narrow in its focus on one practice of hunting and that it is a personal story of three hunters that hopefully is relevant of and to a broader group of people. He is unapologetic of his exclusion of other !Xo cultural practices within the film, as cinematically broad subject matter is less engaging than deeper explorations of more specific subjects. I concede this point, although am concerned that perhaps the implicit suggestion in the film is that this one element of !Xo culture is represented as definitive of San people generally.

Craig addresses the problem of reinforcing stereotypes of a pre-modern San and says: “Of course we must push away from those things too and not stereotype these people, and perhaps for some people that’s what The Great Dance would do – enforce that stereotype. But, we’re hoping that people with a more open mind would unhinge that stereotype, because if you want to face something and get over it, don’t you have to look at it?”

Craig asks himself what the effect of his film would have been if he had represented the rife alcoholism and all the “nightmares” that the San people face. He tells me that he always thinks of the effect of the film on the people and for him The Great Dance has restored a level of pride among San people in their San identity.
I interrogate Craig further, asking him who was consulted and whose opinions were asked in the making of the film. I want to know whether the entire !Xo community was included in the research or just the hunters that are featured in the film. Craig tells me that it was mainly the three hunters who were consulted. Here he makes the point that San communities are diverse and that various communities have different opinions and different languages and that a cohesive San opinion is impossible to obtain. He also claims that San peoples feel less pressurised to adopt static and final opinions and that they are comfortable with changing their minds. So, what the !Xo hunter tells Craig one day may not be the same thing he will tell him the next day. Craig laughs and makes the point that this is a film about three hunters and that to complete a study of all San experience would take a documentary series that would go on for thousands of years. He notes that his film represents only one aspect and that other films and articles and research will have to fill in the gaps and represent other elements of San experience. He does note, however, that extensive opinions from other San communities were sought via WIMSA, particularly regarding the naming of the film and also to “establish that the broader San community were happy to be represented in the way the film portrayed the San people” and to ascertain the level of interest in hunting among the broader San community.

Craig tells me that the general opinion about the film’s title was favourable, where San people understand the hunt to be like a great dance. He also remarks that the level of interest in hunting was surprisingly high, across diverse San communities and even amongst young San peoples who have never hunted. Craig puts this down again to the value of hunting in identity-building for the San peoples. I ask him how often the hunting activity is in fact practiced and he is unable to give a definitive answer but guesses that maybe once a year or even once every two years. He notes that 95% of San people no longer hunt at all any more and that they are settled in impoverished villages. The !Xo group that are shown in the film are among a few who still hunt and even they hunt only rarely by means of the chasing hunt.

I am interested to know what effect the process of filmmaking with the !Xo peoples had on the people themselves. I ask Craig about the crew’s living arrangements in the Central Kalahari, their relationships with the !Xo people and how they communicated. He tells me that all communication between the filmmakers and the San took place through a translator, Xamaha “Extra” Langwane who is a high school educated !Xo man who grew up with the hunters and who provided an effective bridge between the hunters and the filmmakers.

Craig tells me that for most of the time, there were only three crew members (or four if you include the San translator) shooting in the Kalahari. Craig tells me that it was important to stay low profile because of the risk they were at of being discovered there. He also says that a small crew was of benefit because they did not want to disturb the hunters or animals during the hunt. Supplies of food and water were also difficult to come by and they could only fit a small crew into their vehicle. Furthermore, they wanted to keep the ratio between San and non-San people in favour of San so as to maintain a level of comfort amongst the three hunters.

Regarding their living arrangements, Craig explains that the three crew members stayed alongside the !Xo people and that all their resources such as food and water were shared with the !Xo people who, in turn, shared their food with them. Despite these close living arrangements however, Craig reports that they did not become very close to the !Xo people. There was a friendly cooperation and a respect between them, but on leaving the community at the end of the first month of shooting in the Kalahari, the !Xo community were surprisingly unemotional about saying goodbye to the Fosters and Teo Bielefeld who had lived and worked with them so closely for the first month. Craig reports that immediately after a rush of disappointment at the !Xo’s lack of attachment to them, he found this display of independence a very refreshing experience, as before he had encountered a high level of dependency in San villages and amongst other groups of San.

Craig also reports that the !Xo were initially not very interested in their film project and even found filming boring. To the !Xo the Fosters were just another group of filmmakers coming to film them. Although they were vaguely interested in watching rushes of the footage that was shot, this did not compare to the level of excitement that they displayed when the Fosters returned six months after their initial shooting to show them a
that the !Xo people became really excited about the project and began to engage more fully in the process, explaining details that had been missed or not fully understood and adding suggestions and further information that was then recorded and later added to the film.

When asked about the effects that filming had on the community itself, Craig is loath to comment because he feels that he has not spent enough time with the !Xo community to track changes in their social arrangement. I am interested to know particularly whether the power relations in the community were rocked by singling out three hunters for attention in this film. Craig says that he did not notice this happening and that the San communities are very egalitarian, where hunters are careful not to boast of their kills and cautiously maintain communal harmony. Their remuneration arrangements were also sensitive to San ways of doing things and the sense of communal ownership over skills and information.

The filmmakers approached WIMSA (the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa) who recommended that they negotiate a daily work rate with the three hunters for the duration of the filming. This was done by asking the hunters what they wanted to be paid for their assistance. The requested fee was voluntarily tripled by the filmmakers later on in the process, and certain goods that the hunters requested were also bought for them. Most interestingly, a percentage of the ownership of the film has been ceded to WIMSA and royalties are claimed by them, which are then distributed amongst various San communities. Craig says that this is the first time that any film regarding the San has ceded part ownership to the San peoples themselves. Craig says he “was naturally concerned” that the !Xo community may not receive a fair portion of the remuneration from the film, but he is sensitive to the fact that to the San people, hunting knowledge is owned by all San peoples, as it is knowledge that has been handed down through many generations of San ancestors and belongs to their San cultural heritage rather than to any individual hunter. According to WIMSA it is then appropriate that money gained from the exchange of this knowledge be shared amongst all San people. The filmmakers have also allowed free usage of the film by San peoples and those with an agenda of empowering or assisting San people.

In our discussion of the film’s finances, Craig also tells me that Coca-Cola (the film’s sponsor) only contributed late in the production process in order to enable the film to be completed and to be transferred to 35mm film. Craig tells me that he is resistant to making films for sponsors or television networks because of the control that sponsors exert over the film. Craig says that the San peoples themselves would have been unlikely to have enjoyed the same level of control and input into the film, had a sponsor have been funding The Great Dance from the beginning of production, because the executive producers’ primary concerns would have been with what the audiences wished to see rather than with what the San people wanted to show.

Having asked all the questions that I had planned, Craig and I discuss the angle of my dissertation and my concerns with the romanticisation of the San as mystical people. Craig says:

“It’s not a very romantic existence. It’s a very hard existence and if I personally had to choose, I would definitely not choose that. I would choose this. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t identify with them. So, why do you think it is that people feel, or some people feel so angry with that angle? What is it in their psyche that is rebelling against who they are? Maybe because it’s been done very badly in a lot of books and films – it’s so trite, so surface, and obviously one rebels against that because our humanity is so much more than that. But on a complex level…

Craig goes on to discuss reservations that a few individuals have had with the San’s identification with animals in their altered states. He expresses his thoughts on those who judge the San’s twin consciousness and locates this discussion within my broader concern regarding the colonial relationship:

“We are mammals and so we have an identity with other mammals, but that becomes: “Oooo are you trying to suggest that...” It’s an opening of the self to other things and other identities and it’s not a desperate holding onto one’s own identity. And when colonial forces moved into the Americas and Australia, the people they saw were open to ideas, open to Christianity and various other things. They were interested in those stories. Their minds were naturally open, whereas the colonial people were certainly not open to taking on anything from these people. So they were coming, again, close-
I do feel that there's some sense of that in just writing the whole thing off as: "Oh it's romanticised..." There's a much bigger picture there, I think, that people aren't seeing, and that to me is...

There's all this conflict between humans over race, over culture, over class and all this stuff. But if one can get past those things by opening up oneself ... – that's what I'm interested in and I think that telling people about the San can be an amazing window into a bigger side of humanity. It's not just aboriginal people. It's a lot of people who are looking at the human mind, at the human psyche, in a more holistic way.


