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Accentuate the 'negative'

reality and race in Australian film reviewing

Truth, anger and realism

The Fringe Dwellers (Bruce Beresford 1986) is an Australian film which follows the fortunes of one Aboriginal family – the Comeaways – and in particular of their teenage daughter (Kristina Nehm). The film – which is a mixture of comedy, social issues and moments of horror – includes her unwanted pregnancy, and the death of her baby, before she finally leaves the community where she grew up.

Evan Williams, reviewing *The Fringe Dwellers*, compares it unfavourably with an earlier film, *Wrong Side of the Road* (Ned Lander 1985). His dissatisfaction with the former comes from its failure to live up to the standards set by the latter. The earlier piece was, he states:

... as rough as a smoker's throat after an all-night party. It was a scruffy little piece, loosely scripted, acted mainly by amateurs and shot in black and white. But from first to last, it quivered with truth. It was full of raw anger and pain ... [and] uncompromising realism. The Aboriginal characters were not the smiling, quaintly picturesque and happy-go-lucky folk we might prefer them to be, but miserable battlers, petty crims, boozers, unemployed drifters - pathetic victims of a white man's society (Williams 1986)

The 'truth' of indigenous life in Australia, according to Williams, is 'miserable battlers'. It is a world of 'petty crims' and 'boozers' and 'unemployed drifters'. The 'truth' of Aboriginality is, finally, that indigenous Australians are 'pathetic victims'.

The terminology of this film review is interesting. It is not the eccentric position of an iconoclast: rather, it is supremely representative of the way in which film reviewers in Australia write about representations of indigenous Australia. That is what this article is about.

Cultural reviews in newspapers and magazines – of films, television programs and books – are a fascinating journalistic genre. They represent, for most readers, their most everyday and common encounter with cultural criticism and aesthetic discourses. They suggest ways to engage with representations – here, with representations of indigenous Australians. They suggest to the reader ways in which it is possible to make sense of Aboriginality. They do not simply describe what is in the film – there is always more than one way to describe a film. Rather, they pick and choose which elements of the film they will emphasise, and how these will be evaluated. In doing so, they draw on wider discourses - both aesthetic, and about social situations in Australia – in order to propose ways in which film audiences could reasonably make sense of representations of Aboriginal characters in Australian films.

Making sense of *Blackfellas*

The newspaper reviews of the 1993 film *Blackfellas* (James Ricketson) demonstrate the standard way in which film reviews in Australian newspapers make sense of indigenous characters.

Blackfellas presents the experiences of a group of urban-living Aboriginal people in Western Australia. The film deals with unmarried motherhood, theft, drug-dealing, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, imprisonment, corrupt policing, and finally murder. It also – through the centring of Aboriginal actors, and the presentation of their sometimes joyful performances – allows for more hopeful readings of community solidarity, cultural continuity and choices for the future. However, these possibilities are never communicated in reviews of the film. These reviews always focus on its presentation of 'negative' characteristics: and then celebrate the 'realism' of such images.

Raymond Gill interviews James Ricketson, the (white) director of the film, under the headline, 'Film just a glimpse into Aboriginal life', allowing the director to claim that the film 'presented life as it is' (Gill 1993, p29). For Ivan Hutchinson, *Blackfellas* 'takes white Australians into the world of Aboriginal people with ... surprising honesty' (Hutchinson 1993). In *The Age EG magazine* an anonymous commentator states that: 'The film is as frank about race as its name implies, and is

vividly honest in its group portrait of Aborigines trapped between two cultures' (Anon, *EG* 1994, p5). In an interview with Julietta Jameson, David Ngoombujarra – one of the film's stars – claims: 'that's what its realistically like in Perth' (Jameson 1993, p17). In the anonymous article on '*Blackfellas* Awarded' in the *Age*, Father F M Chamberlain, in awarding the film the Australian Catholic Film Office Award, states that: '*Blackfellas* is a realistic ... portrait of urban Aborigines' (quoted in Anon, 'Arts Diary' 1993 1). For Lynn Barber, the film's relationship to the real is expressed in her comment that it is: 'reflecting the contemporary experience of urban Aborigines' (Barber 1993).

These film reviewers all want to make claims that this film represents the reality of Aboriginality in Australia – it is 'honest', 'frank' and reflects indigenous experience.

It may not be immediately apparent just how odd such language is: for as readers of film reviews, we are so familiar with it. The claim that a given film shows the 'reality' of a situation is a common strategy in film reviewing. Indeed, Colin McArthur sees this as one of the dominant ways of evaluating films in this genre of writing, as he describes the 'relentless bludgeoning' of every text by newspaper reviewers who want to describe how far reality has been 'captured' by a film or television program (McArthur 1980, p61).

Nevertheless, this approach to films is worthy of some thought. What does it mean to claim that a film presents the 'honest', truthful, reflective 'reality' of indigenous experience? Does it imply that the film adequately represents the individual lives of hundreds of thousands of indigenous people of all areas, social classes, genders and sexualities across the whole of Australia? When the question is posed in such a way, the answer must obviously be 'no'. Rather, what such claims about the 'truth' of Aboriginality – and the fact that this can apparently be shown in a single film – suggest, is that there is on some higher, abstract, idealistic level a simplistic, easily formulated 'truth' that transcends the messy details of individual lives and situations in order to present an inner, essential ideal of the situation. This is what the 'realistic' discourses of film reviewing do: suggest that there is a thing called 'Aboriginality' which is simple, easily described and easily known to non-indigenous Australian audiences – and film reviewers.

1. 'Aboriginality' is: negative

What does this ideal, simple, abstract 'Aboriginality' claimed by film reviewers look like?

Firstly, it is composed - as the quotation from Evan Williams' review of *The Fringe Dwellers* quoted at the start of this paper makes clear - of negative elements of culture.

The reviews of *Blackfellas* cited above insist that the film shows the 'reality' of indigenous experience. This 'reality' consists of the negative elements of the film: in listing its good points, Lynden Barber approvingly includes the fact that: '[i]ts characters variously drink, spend time in jail, steal cars and deal in stolen VCRs' (Barber 1993). This is all seen as realistic; in contrast, Barber throws up an imaginary group of texts and of misguided left-wingers, who would show only 'positive' representations: the film displays 'authenticity' because it 'never pussyfoots around for fear of transgressing zealous notions of political correctness' (Barber 1993). 'Political correctness' is a term employed with reactionary intent in order to imply that an unnamed group of people ('they') want to stop people telling the 'truth', by making positive representations compulsory. To 'pussyfoot' is to tread overly carefully, to 'pussyfoot around' is to avoid a central issue — the truth about Aboriginality — by means of euphemisms and excuses. Similar accolades, and in similar terms, are accorded the film by Stephanie Bunbury. In acclaiming it, she states that 'there is nothing worthy or self-consciously correct about *Blackfellas*' (Bunbury 1993, p49). Again, Bunbury is validating the film for showing negative (realistic) social aspects, as opposed to the false image that a '[politically] correct' film might show.

These journalists approach indigenous representations in particular ways, and with particular assumptions. These assumptions result in a genre of writing in which it is always insisted 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.

Of course, this is not true. There are indeed many indigenous lawyers and doctors and academics and journalists in Australia. Colin McKinnon, from the Aboriginal Actor's Corporation 'Koori Access to Television and Film' course, states that 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"' (Perera, 1995: 12). But for film reviewers, this is not the case. Representations of indigenous lawyers are less 'realistic' than representations of: 'miserable battlers, petty crims, boozers, unemployed drifters'.

This is unsurprising. In wider aesthetic discourses, difficult, negative experiences are always named as more 'realistic'. It is part of the term's meaning (the 'gritty' in 'gritty realism' may not always be stated, but it is often implied). This is not the only possible meaning of the word – film history names many different aesthetics as forms of realism, from Italian neo-realism (*The Bicycle Thief*) to Hollywood Classical realism (*Pretty Woman*). Nevertheless, in contemporary popular aesthetics 'realistic' often implies more difficult, negative experiences. It is this use which is made of the term in reviews of indigenous characters in Australian films.

2. Aboriginality is: not funny

Linked to this point is the idea that certain genres of films are better suited to represent Aboriginality in Australia.

As we noted at the start of this article, Evan Williams contrasts *The Fringe Dwellers* with *Wrong Side of the Road*, saying of the later film that: 'the futility and desperation [of *Road*] ... is somehow missing here'.

The Fringe Dwellers includes scenes with a variety of generic affiliations: some are tragic, some comic, some social realist. The film can be dismissed by Evan Williams as unrealistic for its portrayal of 'happy-go-lucky folk'; but at the same time, it is open to being read as realistic by other reviewers. Whenever reviewers *do* call the film 'realistic', however, they do so – like the reviewers of *Blackfellas* - by focussing on the 'negative' experiences of its characters. A review of the film in the *Sunday Mail*, for example, headlines with 'Aborigines and the way things

are' (Anon, *Sunday Mail* 1987), and finds that: 'the film lays bare the problem of Aboriginals'; Michael O'Regan believes that the film: 'shows things the way they are and leaves the judgements to the audience' (O'Regan 1987); while for P P McGuinness, it is: 'one of the most truthful and direct accounts of the real state of the deprived sectors of the Aboriginal community in Australia ... telling the truth about racism in Australia' (McGuinness 1986, p51). Once again, the degree to which the film can reasonably be described as 'realistic' is that to which it represents the Aboriginal experience in negative terms ('deprived sectors ... the truth about racism'). This is more explicit in comments by Neil Jillett, for example, where he finds of *The Fringe Dwellers* that: 'the film's greatest strength' is showing that 'failure and despair, not hope and success, are the keys to their [presumably, Aborigines'] existence' (Jillett 1993). Similarly, Peter Haran, reviewing the film, links the vocabulary of realism to the negative aspects of the film: 'it tackles with a brutal truthfulness racism and poverty ... This is shanty life with all its inherent misery and peopled with no-hopers' (Haran 1986).

Textually, however, *The Fringe Dwellers* is generically diffuse in a way that is not true of *Blackfellas*. Sequences of the film are marked as belonging to genres which are not regarded as realistic: for example, when the Comeaways, the central characters of the film, move house, the segment seems to be presented as comedy; while Trillby's murder of her child is generically composed as an instance of horror.

In writing about *The Fringe Dwellers*, several reviewers note aspects of the film which are either 'positive', or identified as generic (the two ideas are linked in the term 'gentle comedy', which seems a suitable one to use in describing at least segments of this film). None of the reviews which take this approach to the film employ the keywords of realism. For example, Ivan Hutchinson describes the film in terms of a pair of opposites: while it 'lacks strength' (that is, truth, realism, honesty, and so on), it is 'generally worthwhile entertainment' (Hutchinson 1986); Frank Ashboth notes that 'the most memorable scene is when the Comeaways move, trundling through the main street of the town in a clapped out old truck'. Privileging a scene which seems to be marked as primarily comic (and also upbeat: it is a family event, everyone is together), it would then be difficult for Ashboth to comment on the film in terms of 'realism'. Rather, for him it is 'A gentle [the term

does not suggest 'realistic'] story of a family' (Ashboth 1987). Again, his review does not employ any of those terms which cluster around 'realistic' readings. Similarly, when the anonymous reviewer of the *Daily Sun* describes the film in positive terms — 'Beresford's film is a warm-hearted study of a family' — s/he does not then find it necessary to discuss its relation to the presumed reality of Aboriginal experience.

So, for these reviewers, the film is 'realistic' (honest, truthful); but only to the extent that it avoids comedy. Again, this is a wider aesthetic discourse – not one which is simply applied to representations of indigenous Australians. 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. So films which avoid these latter genres are commonly understood to be more 'realistic'. Some reviewers, wishing to emphasise the 'realism' of particular (negative) representations of indigenous Australians, use generic labels to insist on their 'truth'. Paddy McGuinness, for example, in reviewing *The Fringe Dwellers*, states that the film is 'an important social documentary' (McGuinness 1986), a generic label which clearly marks a privileged relationship to reality. Evan Williams aligns that same film generically as a 'study' (Williams 1986), again suggesting a status as information. These genres are more 'realistic', in popular aesthetic discourses – and therefore tell us more of the 'truth' about Aboriginality.

3. Aboriginality is: an 'issue' and a 'problem'

Rachel Perkins' 1998 film *Radiance* concerns three Aboriginal sisters who return to the family home for their mother's funeral. Perkins states in an interview that the film is: 'not just about Aborigines as a social problem' (Perkins, quoted in Naglazas, 1998: AT6). An interesting thing happens in reviews of the film, though. Somehow, 'not just about Aborigines as a social problem' becomes: not just about Aborigines. Full stop. If it is not about social problems, then - the logic of film reviewing goes - it is not *really* about Aboriginality. For without being about the politics, problems and negative experiences of race in Australia, how can it be

about Aboriginality? Aboriginality – the abstract, simple, essence which we have been tracing in this paper – exists only as a social problem.

The film is not a gritty drama. It is, variously, 'witty and warm-hearted' (Loving, 1998: 12), with 'optimism' (Hessey, 1998: 9), and 'a broad grin on its face and a nose-thumbing awareness of how over the top it is' (Eisenhuth, 1998: 72). It 'blithely mixes high drama and low comedy' (Eisenhuth, 1998: 72), with a 'wicked sense of humour' (Anon, Daily telegraph, 1998: 8). According to Sandra Hall, 'the tone runs the whole gamut from down-home laconic to full-scale operatic' (Hall, 1998: 20); it has: 'an upbeat ... ending' (Sanderson, 1998: 67), (Partridge, 1998: W10). It is: 'a fiery, Southern-style melodrama' (Rooney, 1998: 100). Given that none of the genres it seems to fit into are gritty or social realist, and that it is optimistic and funny, it is unsurprising that the film is never described as showing the 'realistic' 'honest' 'truth' about Aboriginality in reviews. But what is interesting is the absolute degree to which, if the film is not about 'miserable battlers, petty crims, boozers, unemployed drifters', then (according to film reviewers) it is not actually about Aboriginality at all.

Some reviews of the film describe the family situation of the sisters without a single mention that they are indigenous (Diwell, 1998b). What is more common is for reviewers to pick up on a comment in the film's press pack, and insist that although it features indigenous characters, *Radiance* is 'profoundly Australian, but with universal themes'.

This supposed 'universality' is taken up by almost every single review of the film in Australian newspapers. 'The film may be another look at the so-called "black experience" but its strength lies in its universality' (Banks, 1998: 5), says one, and this word is used by many of the reviews of the film (Anon, Daily Telegraph, 1998: 8), (Kennedy, 1998: 20), (Partridge, 1998: W10), (O'Neill, 1997: 26), (Rooney, 1998: 100).

'Incidentally', comments another reviewer, 'the sisters are Aborigines. This has some relevance, but is mostly immaterial. These are universal characters in a universal story' (Juddery, 1998: 19). 'The story is not only about Aboriginal problems' says another reviewer: 'There are the strife and angst familiar to dysfunctional families no matter their class or culture' (James, 1998: 20); and they:

'could fit in anywhere' (Hall, 1998: 20). For Lowing, the characters represent: 'people everywhere' (Lowing, 1998: 12).

In one review:

What struck me most forcibly about *Radiance* is that the three Aboriginal women at the centre of things might just as easily have been white ..
Radiance is not about Aboriginality – it is about womanhood. The universality of its concerns ...it deals with universal human values and emotions (Williams, 1998: 21)

Once again, this aesthetic claim – the appeal to 'universal' relevance and appeal – is not specific to comments on indigenous representation. It is a standard rhetorical strategy in much aesthetic discourse. It is also a problematic one: for there are, reasonably, no experiences in the world which are in fact 'universal' to every man, woman, child, of every race and nationality on Earth. It is rather a rhetorical strategy which claims that what I, the reviewer, have experienced, *should be* universal, *should be* what everyone in the world feels like. But once again, this aesthetic strategy is taken up with particular consequences in discussions of the representations of indigenous people in Australian film.

It is important once again to insist that laying claim to the 'universal' relevance of *Radiance* is only one possible approach to the film – the reviews do not say this simply because it is the 'truth' about the film. There are other possible ways in which it could be approached. Interviews with Perkins, for example (although they also claim that: 'the themes and issues are universal - (Crawford, 1998: 6)), insist that the film is 'an outlet for [Perkins] to air messages about Aboriginality' (Crawford, 1998: 6), that: 'Self-representation [by indigenous people] is really changing things' (Diwell, 1998: 28), that Perkins feels the responsibility to: 'become a voice for [her] people' (Crawford, 1998: 6). Although Perkins states that: "I don't think I'm really making a statement", she goes on to add that: 'but I want to do something that is contributing [to indigenous representation] in some way'" (Sutherland, 1998: 45). A review of the film in *Screen International* interprets it in terms of race, suggesting that: 'with issues of race always a talking point, it should find a welcome reception on the international festival circuit'

(George, 1998: 18). Indeed, an article by Catherine Simpson in *Metro* suggests that:

Radiance has frequently been viewed as a “universal story” ... This ultimately results in a superficial response to the film’s Aboriginality ... It seems counter-productive to overlook the specific socio-historical realities central to the story – the “stolen generation” and the history of dispossession (Simpson, 1999: 28, 29)

Simpson then goes on to examine the kind of Aboriginality which is represented in *Radiance*.

This is not to suggest that these interpretations are the *correct* ones, and that all Australian newspaper reviewers somehow missed the truth of the film. It is rather to insist that there are a variety of ways in which any film can be discussed; and it is the choices which are interesting. Because *Radiance* is not about ‘Aboriginality’ as a social problem - because it is not about crims and pathetic boozers – it is therefore, for film reviewers, not really about Aboriginality. Race vanishes, and it is seen as being ‘universal’.

Evan Williams makes this point explicit by referring back to his earlier reviews of indigenous representation:

I remember reviewing warmly in these pages back in 1982, *Wrong Side of the Road*, a harsh, regretful tale about ... the encroachment of modern urban Australia on traditional black values. But except in oblique and seemingly incidental ways, *Radiance* is not about Aboriginality ...’ (Williams, 1998: 21)

Wrong Side of the Road (indigenous director, indigenous characters, indigenous actors) is ‘about Aboriginality’. *Radiance* (indigenous director, indigenous characters, indigenous actors) is not: because it is not about social issues.

Again, this is not surprising. ‘Social problems’ are always negative. But it is interesting to see that this transcendent thing called ‘Aboriginality’, abstracted from the messy reality of individual indigenous lives in Australia, is understood as a ‘social problem’. Other groups of people are not understood in the same way: for example, in Australia we do not have an abstracted thing called ‘whiteness’ which

is seen to be a 'social problem'. This is the way in which 'Aboriginality' exists, in wider discourses about society in Australia, and in the journalistic genre of film reviewing.

What does this matter?

To summarise, 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.

In general terms, it is disturbing and frustrating to have someone else claim that they know more about you than you do about yourself. In the case of indigenous people in Australia, the claim to know them better than they know themselves has a very particular history, used by white experts as a way to control and manage them, to not allow them any say in how they were treated (because, of course, they couldn't know what was best for them. Bain Attwood names this tendency in Australia 'Aboriginalism', claiming that:

Aboriginalism disempowers Aborigines because they are made into an object of knowledge over which Europeans, as the dispensers of truth about their needs and requirements, gain control (Attwood, 1992: ii)

Such a position of expertise, Bain further argues, allows non-indigenous people to take control of indigenous lives, 'exercising authority over Aborigines by making statements about them, authorising views of them, and ruling over them' (i). In newspaper reviews of films featuring indigenous characters we see a particularly unashamed form of 'Aboriginalist' discourse: the simple, unabashed claim on the part of non-indigenous reviewers to know what indigenous life – and indigenous people – are 'really' like. It is little wonder that there is competition in the public sphere for the right to lay claim to knowing the 'reality' of indigenous people in Australia.

Jindalee Lady (Brian Syron, 1992) is a film by an indigenous director which tells the story of Lauren, a successful Aboriginal fashion designer and businesswoman. Discovering that her (white) husband is being unfaithful to her, she leaves him, although pregnant with his child. She gives birth, but the baby later dies. Going on with her career, which becomes increasingly successful, her new (Aboriginal) lover encourages her to avow her Aboriginal heritage more strongly.

As noted above, Colin McKinnon, from the Aboriginal Actor's Corporation 'Koori Access to Television and Film' course, wants to see more representations of indigenous Australians in middle-class roles as: 'That's the true picture of Australia' (Perera, 1995: 12). The publicity discourses around *Jindalee Lady* make similar claims. The film's press synopsis states that:

The major aim of this film is ... [to offer] the chance for Aboriginals to view themselves, as in reality many of them are, as creatively and administratively successful members of Australia's multicultural society (Anon, Synopsis, 1990).

This is a different kind of 'realism' – one which insists that there 'really' are Aboriginal people who are 'successful' in such ways. Brian Syron, the director of the film, makes particular use of such arguments: 'there are in fact, many, many successful indigenes who are working towards goals no much different from those of the dominant cultures in our society' (Syron, 1992); 'Let's not forget that I am depicting a generation where this is not just a dream, but it is a reality. There are designers out there' (Syron, 1993: 169). Indeed, Syron goes so far as to state that: 'I live on a very middle-class level, and I make no bones about the fact that I'm a bourgeois black, or an uptown nigger. I am...' (Syron, 1993: 169).

Certainly it may be argued that the proportion of middle-class Aboriginal people is small, and that such images are unrepresentative. However, filmic images have never claimed to be representative. As E K Fisk suggests, 'the proportion of Aborigines that are abjectly poor is small, but in many sections of the community, they are most visible' (Fisk, 1985: 106). Similarly, Aboriginal people living traditionally-oriented lifestyles have a visibility which is not directly proportional to their statistical representation in the population. Films, or any other cultural product, do not simply reflect populations in statistically-accurate ways. They

certainly have not in the history of Aboriginal Australian representation, and they do not in other contexts. It is disingenuous to use this argument to argue against showing these images of Aboriginal people.

Syron's is a discourse of 'realism', of what the 'reality' of indigenous experience is in Australia, which is just as abstracted and idealistic as the 'realism' of the film reviewers I have been discussing. What is of interest for this argument is that neither of these claims is simply 'correct'. There is no single, simple reality which all indigenous Australians share. Some are indeed 'uptown niggers', others do indeed live in positions of extreme disadvantage. What is of interest is that any attempt to claim superior knowledge of the 'reality' or 'truth' of a given situation is necessarily an attempt to stake a claim: and sets one up for disagreements and contest over what constitutes that 'reality'.

A case study of a 'controversy' around *The Fringe Dwellers* is instructive. PP McGuinness and Bobbi McHugh are both commentators on this film - both claiming to know 'reality'.

Paddy McGuinness claims that: '[a] campaign of slander has already been mounted [against the film]', (McGuinness, 1986). Three Aboriginal delegates at Cannes walked out of a screening of the film (Bail 1986, p17); and Bobbi McHugh, 'an administrator at an Aboriginal visual and performing arts centre ... claimed that [*The Fringe Dwellers*] had set Aboriginal rights back 200 years' (p17). To describe reactions to the film as a 'controversy' seems to be somewhat overstating the issue. Kathy Bail introduces the term in her article, but it is in fact difficult to find aggressive attitudes towards the film; most writing expressing sentiments more in tone with the text's own warm sentimentality. Still, the term 'controversy' does accurately convey what is at stake in writing about this film. As suggested above, certain aspects of the text render it available for readings in terms of 'realism' (death, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, racism, drunkenness); while at the same time, some sequences are rendered as explicitly comic. The presence of both sets of markers in the film opens up debate in precisely the terms: is this a 'realistic' representation of Aboriginality, in the terms normally understood in the journalistic invocation of that term?

The pugilistic tone both of defenders and detractors is instructive. On one hand, Bob Merritt presents the view of an Aboriginal reader who feels that the film is dangerous: 'It didn't have a soul because there was no underlying truth' (Bob Merritt, quoted in Bail 1986, p16). To the unstated question as to what then this 'truth' would look like, of what representations would be adequate to the real, Merritt states that: 'Aboriginal people are great interpretive artists ... but this isn't evident in *The Fringe Dwellers* ... Aboriginal people get excited over the natural things in life' (quoted in Bail 1986, p17).

Arguing in the same terms, and equally aggressively, Paddy McGuinness produces an interpretation of the film's 'realism' which is suitable for the more reactionary site of the *Australian Financial Review*. He finds the film perfectly open to readings of which he approves, and which prove congruent with his view of reality. The film is, for him, realistic. His article, '*The Fringe Dwellers* — an honest look at the Aboriginal culture of poverty' (McGuinness 1986, p51) provides an interesting example of the ways in which discourse of the real can be mobilised. The reality which Patrick McGuinness sees *The Fringe Dwellers* as illustrating is a casually racist one: he promotes, for example, a form of racist 'non-racism' (Hall

1981), whereby those demanding rights for Aborigines are labelled 'inverted racists'; as though simply by denying that race were an issue would this become true. McGuinness also presents a diatribe against Aboriginal land rights which entirely misses the political dimension of the protest, stating that:

While it is perfectly true that Europeans occupied Australia without the consent of its Aboriginal occupants ... it does not follow that every claim made for compensation for this past wrong is now justified ... (McGuinness 1986, p51)

McGuinness's article contains typically ignorant comments on the components of Aboriginal identity (for example asserting that biology determines personality; and repeating typical redneck fears that Aborigines get life too easy). And, eventually: 'The true problem facing many Aborigines', McGuinness asserts: 'is not racism at all ... but the culture of poverty ... extended families ... are a major barrier to ... upward mobility' (McGuinness 1986, p51).

In making an interpretation which foregrounds the 'negative' elements of poverty and despair, McGuinness is free to invoke the language associated with 'realism':

... the true state of affairs is clearly pointed to in Mr Beresford's film ... one of the most truthful and direct accounts of the real state of the Aboriginal community in Australia ... represents a major contribution to setting the record straight, to telling the truth about racism in Australia ... an important social documentary (p 51).

That this insistence on the reality of the film occurs in the article which also contains the most explicit and aggressive belief in a single 'truth' about social reality is not coincidental. The writing of McGuinness illustrates the way in which insisting on a film as 'realistic' implies a confidence in 'the real' to which the text can be linked. The whole of a society, the experiences of hundreds of thousands of people over hundreds of years, can be accurately summarised in a single sentence by P P McGuinness, which captures the truth of their entire lives.

In the case of McGuinness, the reactionary nature of the reality he perceives in modern Australia merely draws attention to this process. The writer believes his interpretation of contemporary society is the only correct one. He explicitly rails

against those who disagree with him, the mythically politically-correct, those 'inverted racists' who would seek to discriminate against the good honest white man such as McGuinness himself. Similarly, there is no doubt on McGuinness' part that *The Fringe Dwellers* can be only interpreted in one way. Those who have mounted the campaign of slander are not allowed any validity in their interpretation of the film: McGuinness takes it as read that they must have interpreted the film as he has — arguing that Aborigines do not face racism — but cannot admit to such an unpalatable 'truth'. If those who disagree with him did not make such an interpretation, it would seem, they *must* be wrong.

McGuinness and Merritt illustrate not only the investment that comes in deciding who may describe Aboriginal experience, but also the implications of bringing to bear discourses of realism in the interpretation of film texts. To assert realism is to claim territories both of interpretation and of social experience — to insist on univocal understandings of both reality and of the texts which illustrate it.

Colin MacKinnon and Brian Syron point out that it is possible to claim middle-class indigenous experience as 'reality'. With Bobbi Merritt, they are deeply unhappy with the 'reality' of indigenous life which film reviewers claim to know with such certainty. This should at least give pause for thought for those engaged in the production of the popular aesthetic discourses of film reviewing. 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.

Given the history of white people in Australia claiming to know the 'truth' of indigenous lives better than indigenous people know themselves - and the exercises of power which such claims have enabled - the differences between the 'reality' of indigenous experience claimed by these reviewers, and that of indigenous cultural producers, should at least require a pause to think. What happens when the terms of 'truth', 'honesty' and 'realism' are used in relation to representations of indigenous Australians as: 'miserable battlers, petty crims, boozers, unemployed drifters - pathetic victims of a white man's society'?

The recommendation of this article is simple: that journalists who deal with these representations should stop talking about the 'realism' of images, and stop using

this as a way of celebrating the greater reality of crime, suffering and pain. There are other ways of discussing the function of films and other texts in our cultures. The language of 'realism' is a problematic one, and its implications should be thought about carefully.

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