

**Round table: *How to 'Shoot' the Aborigine:  
Authenticity and Reconciliation in Recent Independent Australian Cinema***

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The last decade has seen a substantial output of art-house movies directed, co-directed or counselled by Indigenous-Australians. The film musical *One Night the Moon* was made by the Arrernte Aboriginal director Rachel Perkins in 2001; *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was shot by the white-Australian Hollywood enfant terrible Phillip Noyce in 2002; *The Tracker* by independent Dutch-Australian filmmaker Rolf de Heer in 2002; *Beneath Clouds* represented part-Aboriginal director Ivan Sen's debut in 2002; De Heer co-directed *Ten Canoes* with Yolngu Aboriginal Peter Djigirr in 2006; *September* was filmed by white film director Peter Carstairs in 2007; 2009 was the year of the internationally acclaimed *Samson and Delilah* by the Aboriginal filmmaker Warwick Thornton; and 2010 saw the release of Brendan Fletcher's *Mad Bastards*.

Arguably, these movies participate in the continued need that non-Indigenous Australians recognise the Aboriginal world within and without settler-Australian society. This round table addresses if, how and why Indigenous 'authenticity' is projected through a representative choice of these films in relation to Reconciliation, the mainstream initiative towards bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian history and cultures.

Martin Renes analyses *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (RPF) as a textual hybrid that applies Western film technology and narrative techniques to tell a story of cultural genocide. Phillip Noyce adapts Doris Pilkington Garimara's biography *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), which depicts her mother's 1,000 mile trek from an institution for 'half-caste' children near Perth back to her home in the Kimberley region in the north of Western Australia. Turning this devastating walk into a quest and family drama, Noyce aims to engage a large national audience and to spur the mainstream acknowledgement of the plight of the Stolen Generations. These children of mixed European-Indigenous descent were taken away from their Indigenous mothers/families and institutionalized and fostered out to learn the 'white ways', often trained to function in the lower tiers of mainstream society as station hands, domestic servants etc. in the period 1930-70.

Contesting the common requirement that texts mirror 'genuine' Indigeneity, which sees the nowadays inevitably hybrid Indigenous life experience as 'not the real thing', Renes picks up on Noyce's use of Western filmic strategies (focalisation, camera movement, use of colour and 'magic' elements) to tell an Indigenous story outside its oral tradition. The inherent contrast of the oral vs. written vs. filmed text reveals the ontological impossibility to reproduce a textual original when the means of telling differ. Similarly, according to Renes, Indigeneity does not equal the recovery of racial authenticity. While mainstream attempts to configure Indigeneity often rely on a pre-existing essence rooted in a static and nostalgic past, its retrieval effectively *constitutes* identity as a material *incorporation* of discourse. Yet, considering Indigeneity as

performance allows Australian identity to reconcile to its violent past of colonisation on the basis of the First Nations' inclusiveness rather than assimilation. The question then is where *RPF* stands ideologically.

Inasmuch as *RPF* represents a sympathetic view that strengthens links between non-Indigenous society and its Indigenous margins, and helps to centre these margins for all Australians, Renes believes that its white authorship and use of Western narrative technique is not problematic per se; its 'inauthenticity' can be read as an adaptive strategy for Indigeneity to incorporate as Australianness, on a par with the protagonists' homage to Indigenous survival strategies. Yet, it remains a postcolonial challenge for the mainstream to find valid positions of enunciation and commitment within such an Aborigine-informed spectrum of Australian identity, and *RPF* does not solve this issue.

Carles Serra addresses photography as 'authenticity' in *Ten Canoes (TC)*, shot by Rolf de Heer in Arnhemland in Yolngu country, on invitation by the Indigenous actor David Gulpilil, and based on pictures of a Yolngu goosehunt in the 1930s taken by the white anthropologist Donald Thomson. Serra highlights the key role played by De Heer's use of the Thomson picture collection in the making of the movie: "Rolf de Heer and his group came here and opened our minds. He showed us the [Thomson] photos", a Yolngu actor said. Similarly, de Heer tells us how he gained the respect and trust of the Aboriginal lay actors when he intervened in the design of the ten canoes, taking as reference and authority Thomson's pictures and notes. "My intervention is a turning point", de Heer says proudly, "I am now considered to have the wisdom of an elder, and they respect me as one from this point on".

Serra is critical with De Heer's disingenuous attempt to represent Aboriginal identity, which draws on Barthes' ontological description of 'photographic certitude' in *Camera Lucida* as this links the image of the photographed object to the certainty it existed at one point. De Heer, however, sanitised the Thomson photos to create a prehistoric culture out of historic material and thus manipulated this ontological relationship. Yet, to the extent that the Thomson collection had become a part of Yolngu everyday life, this made it possible for the Yolngu and Rolf de Heer to join in the common *TC* project as a tribute to the Arnhem Land Aboriginal peoples and their ancestral past. Thus, with some reserve Serra contends that *TC* can still be seen as a valid token of Reconciliation between Indigeneity and the Western world.

Catalina Ribas Segura analyses non-verbal communication as Indigenous authenticity in the post-reconciliation film *Samson and Delilah (S&D)*, an exploration of the lives of two Indigenous teenagers who overcome multiple difficulties through shared love. Thornton's purpose is to show how young people in the remote Aboriginal communities of Central Australia are marginalised and neglected not only by the authorities but also by their own communities. Thornton's portrayal focuses on their problems and miseries such as violence, drug abuse and living conditions as well as explores their strength and hopes in culturally specific ways.

The film's strategies and techniques are determined by the film's intended low budget, but they provide a sense of authenticity through non-verbal communication. The use of a hand-held camera allows the director to create intimacy between the characters and the audience, while the lack of visual effects paints an authentic picture of "communities and lives that express a contemporary reality" (Isaacs 15), supported by the brightness of light in successive locations –the old mission-reserve, the town and traditional country. Following Indigenous custom, Samson and Delilah never speak to each other but communicate through actions, looks and gestures, accepting each other's presence and respecting each other's need for space. Since dialogues are meaningful cinematographic components, Western spectators are othered and prompted to question

the communicative relevance of conversation. The Indigenous feature of non-verbal communication is given additional strength by the absence of a voice in off and the use of extra-diegetic music to underline the plot.

Conclusion: The round table members highlight that despite the raised awareness of, and sensitivity towards the Aboriginal issue amongst White Australians, the question remains as to which stories mainstream Australia is willing to accept as 'authentically Aboriginal' and how these preferences fit and suit mainstream nationalism. Notably, official policies of Reconciliation between non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australians are seen to fail because the true nature of their neo-colonial relationship remains misunderstood, misrepresented or denied by large factions of White Australia. Thus, Ex Labour PM Kevin Rudd's 2008 symbolic institutional Apology to the First Nations for the harm inflicted by White colonisation cannot outweigh 12 years of regressive conservative tenure. Ex PM John Howard dramatically culminated cutbacks on Indigenous funding, resources and self-management with the federal Northern Territory Intervention of remote Indigenous communities in 2007, which still continues unhindered after the change to social-democrat government. Considered in this light, the nostalgic desire for Indigenous authenticity in texts operates as a romantic foil to the harsh assimilative thrust exerted by official policy.

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**THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:**

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from [www.aedean.org](http://www.aedean.org)