HISTORY, MYTH AND ALLEGORY IN AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

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Abstract. How can historical fiction tell the truth about the past? Focusing on the disciplinary boundaries between history and cultural theory, this article argues that, at moments of national crisis, historical fiction has the capacity to produce new forms of public memory and subjectivity that conventional historiography fails to recognise. This is evident in a recent cycle of Australian history films that deal with modernist, traumatic or holocaustal events stemming from the nation's colonial past. Although historians tend to dismiss historical fictions as myth rather than history, cultural theory suggests that violent spectacle films such as *The Proposition* (Hillcoat 2005) can be understood as powerful allegories of historical time and modern subjectivity.

1. Introduction

On the eve of Australia Day 2006, the nation's Prime Minister, John Howard, used his address to the National Press Club to berate 'postmodern' approaches to history, declaring that an 'objective record of achievement' has been 'replaced by a fragmented stew.' At the time of the Prime Minister's speech Kate Grenville's colonial novel, *The Secret River* (2005), and John Hillcoat's violent frontier film, *The Proposition* (2005), were coming under fire from historians and critics as inadequate or flawed representations of the nation's past. Both Grenville's novel and Hillcoat's film belong to a recent cycle of historical fiction which repudiates the nation's long-standing myth of peaceful settlement and pioneering achieve-ment by evoking powerfully imagined scenes of violence between indigenous and settler Australians.

As British historian, Bill Schwarz, points out, it is standard procedure for historians "to raid social fictions – the novel, the film – for historical evidence" with "no curiosity about the *form* in which the narrative itself is embedded" (2004:

93–94). These same historians tend to ignore the work of cultural theorists engaged with cinema and television as the twentieth century's most powerful arbiters of historical memory. In the context of the Australian 'history wars' (sparked by the 1988 Bicentennial celebration of 200 years of white settlement), the re-emergence of cinema as a sphere of public dispute over the nation's past opened up for cultural theorists "the possibility of a 'field' of intersubjectivity where a different form of *public* memory may take shape"[1] (Morris 2004). But it was precisely this possibility – of different forms of public memory arising from historical fiction – that worried not only neo-conservatives but some of Australia's progressive historians.[2]

This article explores the disciplinary boundaries between historiography and cultural theory in relation to a problem they have in common – that of adequately representing and remembering modernist, traumatic or holocaustal events. Rethinking the spectacle of colonial violence in *The Proposition* – in the context of bitter and divisive disputes about the truth and extent of colonial violence in Australian history – I argue that allegorical modes of historical fiction have the capacity to produce new forms of public memory and subjectivity that conventional historiography fails to recognise. I begin with a brief account of how Australian historians defended their discipline against Grenville's colonial novel. I then re-visit a broader debate between historiography and cultural theory (concerned with the modernist event and postmodern subjectivity), and conclude with an example of film allegory as a perceptual mode peculiarly suited to remembering Australian colonial history as a modern catastrophic event.

2. Historical truth

Identifying a crisis of historical truth and the loss of the historian's cultural authority as a legacy of the local history wars, Australian historians, Mark McKenna and Inga Clendinnen, took issue with novelist, Kate Grenville, for claiming that fiction does a better job of taking us into the past than history. In McKenna's view:

> *At issue here is not … the power of fiction to embody a profound historical understanding of the world, but … the dangers that arise when novelists and reviewers of fiction claim for fiction, at the expense of history, the sole right to empathy and historical understanding* (McKenna 2005).

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[1] Morris is writing about Tracey Moffatt's experimental short film, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989). The most recent cycle of 'history films' began with *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001), followed by *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), *Black and White* (Craig Lahiff, 2002) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002), to be joined in 2005 by *The Proposition*.

[2] For a detailed account of how these films were received by historians, critics and neo-conservative commentators in the context of the Australian history wars, see Collins and Davis (2006).

While McKenna focuses on Grenville's claim to superior historical understanding through empathy, Clendinnen's concern is to distinguish the moral purpose of history from the aesthetic purpose of the novel. She seeks to secure the moral authority of history, based on "proper regard for clarity and justice of analysis and the relevance of the evidence," against the novelist's contract with the reader, 'to delight' (Clendinnen 2006:1–2, 31). Noting the ubiquity of 'opportunistic appropriations' of history, Clendinnen advocates a watchdog role for today's historian. Bound by "the iron rules of the discipline" (Ibid. 67), "their obligation is to preserve the past in its least corrupted form" (Ibid. 65).

The cultural authority of historiography, in this debate, draws a line between historical truth and the consoling category of myth. Some Australian historians, however, are bothered by the sharpness of this line. Bain Attwood, for instance, asks "whether you can tell the truth about the Aboriginal past by using traditional methods of history" (Attwood and Chakrabarty 2006:206). He argues that the way out of the impasse between historical and mythic knowledge of the past is 'a dark path' involving 'a number of moves' (Ibid.) The first is 'to consider what memory and myth reveal retrospectively', while another is to take into account 'traumatic histories' – but, he cautions, these only 'take us so far' (Ibid.) Protecting the moral vision of academic history from the aesthetic delights of historical fiction and the dark path of myth, progressive Australian historians, besieged by neo-conservative attacks on their empirical research, continue to claim privileged access to historical truth. However, as Hayden White (1996) has demonstrated, this is not the only option for a historiography of modern, holocaustal events.

3. Modernist truth

For conventional historians, historical fictions not only get the facts 'wrong', they involve Manichean structures of empathy and moral allegiance which undermine the complex truths of the written record. However, for *modernist* historians, the narrative mode (whether factual or fiction) is not so much a threat to historical truth as an inadequate means of representing what White calls the 'holocaustal' modernist event (1996:20). For White, holocaustal events, which function "exactly as infantile traumas […] cannot be simply forgotten or put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered" (Ibid. 20). The traumatic structure or 'modernist de-realization' of such an event, and the difficulty it poses for those who inherit it and those who try to represent it, is said to lead either to the seductions of myth and melodrama in popular genres (Ibid. 26), or to fantasies of 'intellectual mastery' in modernist narratives (Ibid. 32). Rejecting the modern electronic media's recorded images as manipulations which 'explode' the event (Ibid. 23), White concludes that,

> *[…] anti-narrative non-stories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representations of the kinds of 'unnatural' events –*

> *including the Holocaust – that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the 'history' that has come before it* (Ibid. 32).

But historians and cultural theorists engaged with cinema have questioned White's claim that only *anti-narrative* literary techniques have the potential to de-fetishise "both events and fantasy accounts of them which deny the threat they pose" (Ibid. 32). Robert Rosenstone, for instance, has become the champion of a postmodern canon of history films that make sense of past events "in a partial and open-ended, rather than totalised, manner", making use of "fragmentary and/or poetic knowledge" (1996:206). He claims that the self-reflexive history film, with its contradictory elements and multiple points of view, has much to teach historians, especially those social and cultural historians who recognise the need for a postmodern historiography but, so far, have failed to find a postmodern form (Ibid. 205–6). The issue goes deeper, however, than Rosenstone's plea to historians to "accept a new sort of history" based on different rules of engagement (2006:159). As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith stated in 1990, the 'daunting task' is not only to understand how cinema is 'embedded' in histories of economics and politics, but how cinema (and television) are embedded "even more deeply into the history of modern subjectivity" (1990:160). For Nowell-Smith, "it is in these changing patterns of subjectivity, and their complex relationship to other patterns of historical change, that the story of cinema's effectivity lies" (Ibid. 171).

For cinema theorist, Thomas Elsaesser, the postwar shift from 'storytelling' to 're-telling, re-membering' – as the site of 'authentic' engagement between subjectivity and the past – is symptomatic of 'obsession, fantasy, trauma' (Elsaesser 1996:146). Like White, Elsaesser attributes this shift to the modern proliferation of traumatic events "that neither narratives nor images seem able to encompass" (Ibid.) Rather than produce a plausible simulacrum of the past based on consultable historical evidence, media temporality produces something akin to corruptible memory. In Schwarz's words, media time involves "misremembering, misinterpreting, the continual collapsing of narratives, narratives located in 'the wrong' place, strange displacements, the merging of stories, repetitions" (2004:105). It is this new, media temporality that now suffuses historical reality and any account that novelists, filmmakers or historians might give of it.

Arguing that there may be a limit to realist *and* modernist techniques of "fracturing the viewer's identity" in order to make "the extreme otherness of an historical experience representable" (Elsaesser 1996:174), Elsaesser proposes that a popular cinema of excess has the potential, as much as a modernist cinema of restraint, to elicit *Betroffenheit* – an affect which "covers empathy and identification, but in an active, radical sense of being 'stung into action'" (Ibid. 173) The problem that arises, then, is not whether modern temporality and subjectivity are best represented in realist, modernist or postmodern forms: rather the problem lies with a new 'traumatic' formation of the postmodern subject. Elsaesser argues that the media's obsessive, repetitive re-membering of shocking historical events might be better understood as "a particular contemporary subject-effect" in which the subject's relation to history and memory "is necessarily

traumatic (because lacunary, incomplete, narratively no longer sanctioned)" (2001:197–199).

It is here, in the lacunary relation of the postmodern subject to history and memory, that the fragmented, dialectical structure of allegory becomes relevant for understanding historical fiction as an antidote to rather than instance of myth-making. Elsaesser suggests, in passing, that the traumatic structure of the holo-caustal event (which eludes adequate representation and mourning) involves "a crisis of perception … that [requires us to] take in Benjamin's reflections on perception and shock*, with allegory as the preferred hermeneutics of the shock experience*" (my emphasis, 2001:198–189) I want to take up this neglected insight by looking, first, at Walter Benjamin's defence of allegorical expression as an antidote to myth and, then, at how iconographic scenes of colonial violence are 're-touched' by the allegorical intention in Hillcoat's revisionist western film, *The Proposition*.

4. Allegorical truth

For cultural theorists, Benjamin's allegorical mode of understanding the origin (or *ur-history*) of the present through cultural debris, fossils or ruins, has opened up the idea of history as a fragmented, discontinuous (rather than progressive) narrative.[3] Benjamin's recognition of Baroque allegory's secular teleology – as a 'progression of moments' in a theatre of death, decline and decay – derived initially from his study of the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* or mourn-ing-play (Benjamin 1977:165). In Baroque allegory, historical transience finds its physical expression in the emblem of the ruin: "In the ruin … history does not assume the form of the process of eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay" (Ibid. 177–178). For Benjamin, the Baroque ruin makes a violent, even destructive, return in the 'refunctioning of allegory' (Benjamin 1985:42) in Baudelaire's poetry. Here, allegory 'attaches itself to the rubble' and 'offers the image of transfixed unrest' as an image of historical time (Ibid. 38). For Baudelaire, 'myth was the easy path' – Benjamin aimed to demonstrate 'the antidote to myth in allegory' (Ibid. 46). The modern myth that preoccupied Benjamin's allegorical thinking was that of history as progress.[4] As an antidote, he offered the counter-image of history as catastrophe: "Redemption looks to the small fissure in the ongoing catastrophe" (Ibid. 50).

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[3] For an influential interpretation of Benjamin's allegorical thinking, see Buck-Morss (1995:159–201).

[4] Benjamin's prolific writings on this theme since 1916 culminated in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" completed in 1940 and first published in 1950. See Benjamin (1973:245–255).

5. National allegory

Although Fredric Jameson (1986) notoriously relegated modern allegory to 'Thirdworldish' fictions of underdevelopment, Ismail Xavier (1999) makes a strong counter-argument that national cinemas, whether First or 'Thirdworldish,' generate historical allegories in moments of crisis or controversy when the very categories of nation and identity are in dispute. Xavier rejects the idea that allegory is a premodern form, dispensed with by rationality and its preferred aesthetic of realism and naturalism. Rather, modern allegory "expresses the historicity of human experience and value" because it conceives of historical time as change, as crisis, as breaks with the irretrievable past (Xavier 1973:341). National allegory, then, is better understood through Benjamin's most famous allegorical image of historical time as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Ibid. 249). However, repression, violence and the shock of catastrophic events can easily be subsumed into new national myths, evident, for instance, in the teleology of Manifest Destiny that underpins classical Hollywood westerns. But what of historical allegory in a 'Secondworldish' Australian cinema at a moment of national conflict? As Benjamin says, allegory can be used against myth if, like Baudelaire's poetry, "it bears traces of violence … necessary in order to rip away the harmonious façade of the world" (Benjamin quoted in Buck-Morss 1995:182)

Understood allegorically, *The Proposition* takes its place among other texts that attempt to displace the nation's myth of origin from the sacred trenches of Gallipoli to the "immense, historical crime scene" of the colonial frontier (Gibson 2002:1). Hillcoat's film opens with a burst of violence followed by an allegorical question: "Australia – what fresh hell is this?" Here, the film declares its allegorical intention to demolish the myth of frontier history as civilising progress. By drawing heavily on the Baroque emblem of the ruin, *The Proposition* offers a 'theatre of death', a landscape of destruction, a temporality of 'transfixed unrest' as the nation's founding crime scene. Recoiling from this unremitting theatre of destruction, many reviewers looked for some kind of redemption in a transcendent landscape (Flanagan 2005, Hart 2006). But taking a non-redemptive view of the film's violence, William D. Routt claims that *camera distance* – from things too terrible to look at – is the key to the film's revelation of the Australian landscape as 'a primal scene of annihilation' (2005:8). Routt's insistence on the capacity of camera distance to "reveal a new sense of the world" (Ibid. 8) bears on the question that interests me here, that of cinema's allegorical expression of historical time as redemptive, precisely in those moments of revelation when the wreckage of the past is recognised as a concern of the present. As *The Proposition*'s infamous flogging scene makes clear – through its revelation of the *afterlife* of violence in shocked and sated faces, bodies and landscapes – historical violence and its recognition is a matter of more than one temporality, one horizon, one kind of subjectivity. In the recent constellation of films that re-figure the on-going catastrophe of colonial violence in Australia, historical allegory is performing the

paradoxical feat of aligning history's victors with the point-of-view of the defeated, producing a new, ethical form of subjectivity with a bi-cultural sense of nationhood as *one among several* horizons of identity.[5]

6. Allegorical supplements

The suppression of allegory (as an inferior and antiquated form of didactic expression) by nineteenth-century modernism, and its return in postmodern art, was noted in 1980 by Craig Owens who locates the postmodern allegorical impulse in the desire and capacity "to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear" (Owens 1992:52–53). Owens argues that postmodern allegory is a *structure* of perception that involves the doubling of one text by another, the *reading* of one text through another, "however fragmentary, inter-mittent, or chaotic their relationship might be" (Ibid. 54). The postmodern allegorist "adds another meaning to the image […] the allegorical meaning … is a supplement" (Ibid. 54).[6] For Xavier (1999), the emphasis on allegory, "as fragmented and incomplete discourse," challenges the totalising and teleological impulse of progressive history (deployed for instance by Prime Minister Howard when he called for a cohesive, unifying history of 'One People, One Destiny'). Rather than confirm continuity and identity through analogies with the past, modern allegory doubles, supplements or reinterprets earlier texts in such a way that "old facts, like old signs, lose their 'original' meaning when looked at from a new perspective." (Xavier 1999:349) Here, allegory as fragmentary supplement to earlier texts is more like a postmodern stew than a cohesive narrative, corrupting rather than preserving the original meaning of the historical document.

Rather than tell the truth about Australia's colonial past, as many reviewers claim, or de-narrativise historical truth as modernists prescribe, *The Proposition* adopts the allegorical guise of a revisionist western-bushranger-art film in order to *supplement* an existing media iconography of colonial times. As Xavier suggests, "allegory … results from visual compositions that, in many cases, establish a clear dialogue with particular iconographical traditions, ancient and modern" (Ibid. 337). *The Proposition*'s allegorical intention is unmistakable in the opening and closing credit sequences which feature black and white archival photographs of

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[5]   This is particularly the case in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker* and *Black and White* where the non-indigenous spectator is aligned in complex ways with Aboriginal characters. See Collins and Davis (2006:47–52).

[6]   Australian history films tend to be 'classical' in that, whatever their generic borrowings, they privilege a realist or naturalistic aesthetic over modernist self-reflexivity or postmodern frag-mentation. This is not to deny elements of experimentation in the films, for instance the sung narrative in *One Night the Moon* and the transfixed moments of violence in freeze-frames of oil paintings in *The Tracker*, but the intention is allegorical rather than modernist or postmodern.

indigenous and settler Australians in frontier settings.[7] Carol Hart claims that these archival photographs "become mere signs bereft of a referent" concluding that "authenticity in relation to the depiction of indigenous issues remains lacking" (Hart 2006). But from an allegorical perspective, these photographs are not signs without a referent – they are culturally readable, iconographic scenes, allegorically refigured and supplemented by *The Proposition* in a way that preserves their integrity as archival documents but refuses to endow them with 'authenticity.' Rather than authenticate the film's scenes of frontier violence, the archival photographs *correspond to* scenes of violence in the film. These correspondences can be thought of in terms of the allegorical recovery of lost historical time in contemporary media time. Indeed this is literally what happens to the archival photographs in the opening credits. They are clearly marked as archival documents. However, if we look closely, we might recognise the film's actors making an appearance in some of the photographs, literally *re-covering* the image for a new, media temporality.

Although the final montage of photographs at the end of the film does not dissolve the actors' faces into the photographs, here, too, we find the allegorical touch. This montage of photographs of 'routine' colonial violence includes a familiar image of Aboriginal men in neck chains – interrogated by white Native Police accompanied by black trackers. We see a new interpretation of this iconography in *The Proposition* when five tribal men, shackled together in neck chains, are brought in for questioning. This scene does not end in further violence (or its moral condemnation) as we might expect. As Benjamin declares, "That which is touched [*Betroffen*] by the allegorical intention … is simultaneously shattered and conserved."(Benjamin 1985:38) Here, the iconographic image is conserved but also shattered by *laughter*. This laughter occurs at the expense of the white Captain who realises that the Dogman joke, shared in their own language by the black tracker and the Aboriginal men in neck chains, is on him. In the end credit sequence, when we are shown an archival photograph of row-upon-row of Aboriginal men in neck chains, the film's allegorical practice of supplementing colonial iconography with an additional meaning is confirmed. At no point does *The Proposition* pretend to tell the story or reveal the history 'behind' the archival photographs. Rather, the film adds new, supplementary meanings to the cultural iconography of colonial violence to which the photographs belong. When literary critic, Martin Flanagan), questions the historical 'authenticity' of the Dogman joke

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7   The iconography of colonial violence, reinterpreted in *The Proposition*, is preserved in the nation's film archives in scenes of flogging, spearing, shooting, hanging, burning, poisoning, rape and massacre in numerous feature films, including *A Girl of the Bush* (Franklyn Barrett, 1921)*, Bitter Springs* (Ralph Smart, 1950), *Journey Out of Darkness* (James Trainor, 1967), *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1971), *Luke's Kingdom* (TV mini-series, Nine Network, Yorkshire Television, 1976) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978).

(Flanagan 2005:18) he misses the point that cinema has the potential to produce new historical subjectivities – in just such moments.[8]

There is a further sense in which scenes of frontier violence in *The Proposition* can be considered allegorical supplements to histories of native policing in colonial times. If we read the film in terms of its much publicised, heat-crazed shoot in the flyblown town of Winton in Queensland, one of the intertexts available to us is Ross Gibson's lucid essay on the career of Frederick Wheeler, an officer of the Native Mounted Police Corps in central Queensland from 1856–76 (Gibson 2002:53–80). The actions of the Native Police on the Queensland frontier were described at the time as "atrocities which … will damn the character of the colony to all succeeding ages" (*North Australian*, 27 April 1858, quoted in Gibson 2002:63). In this light, the film's narrative axis of Captain Stanley's blood-stained failure to 'civilise this land' doubles or supplements, but does not represent, adapt or translate, Gibson's brooding account of 'the sinister glamour' of Wheeler's murderous career. Yet correspondences in tone, mood and vision between the two texts resonate in such a way that each 'verifies' the other. Together, the texts work as dis-placements and re-memberings, in media temporality, of traumatic, unrepresentable, unmourned historical events – though neither counts, among historians, as 'authoritative history'.

7. Conclusion: an emerging subjectivity

As allegorical re-interpretation, *The Proposition* supplements historical 'traces', rather than represents 'holocaustal' events. The question remains, under what conditions might a national cinema's allegorical reworking of colonial documents and popular frontier iconography into scenes of violence, create new subjectivities by 'stinging' viewers into an affective and ethical response? When we look at this current cycle of history films we might remember that scenes of colonial violence have been present in Australian film and television throughout the twentieth century. We might also remember that, although frontier violence was well documented and debated during the nineteenth century, it disappeared from national histories written after Federation in 1901, until the 1960s. Such temporal gaps in historical and media memory create small fissures for the allegorical impulse "to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear." But allegorical rescue is not a matter of redeeming the past for new national myths, as *The Proposition* demonstrates. It is a matter of using allegory against myth to realise a different history, one that might recognise the potential of a 'Secondworldish' subjectivity – at home with defeat – to transform national

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[8]   See Langton on "new cinematic representations of the Aboriginal police tracker" and "the readiness of the contemporary audience to encounter Aboriginal subjectivity and agency" (Langton 2006:64)

identity into something other than a consoling myth built on the hellish repetition of violence and catastrophe.

Acknowledgements

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