

Seeing White—Female Whiteness and the Purity of Children in Australian, Chinese and British Visual Culture

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In this paper, I interrogate the expression and usage of 'whiteness' in Australian, British and Chinese visual culture. My approach is through reading local texts with an eye to transcultural systems of meaning, paying particular attention to the ways in which whiteness is used as a doubled category in sexual politics. The paper is formed through the performance of cross-cultural connectivities within an epistemological emphasis on the travelled theorist. The movement between Chinese, Australian and English ethical positions are constitutive of the perspectives expressed here; the perspectives are themselves concerned to look back and into those ethical positions. The performance works towards a recognition of the semiotic systems of power and identity, and therefore of the conditions of theoretical performance itself.

Whiteness as explored in white studies, particularly as exemplified in Richard Dyer's *White*, is a racial category; generally understood as a construction of privilege in many political, social, and economic environments. Dyer's argument is that whiteness is a malevolent fiction, that white people are neither actually nor symbolically white at all (Dyer 1997: 42–43). It is rather a semiotic field within which people are prioritised in the discourses of real power. In this field, whiteness is made bright, predominantly masculine, and inextricably linked to the cultural history of European colonialism. It is everywhere in popular fiction, assuming prominence from the narrative, the casting of films, even the choice of lighting technologies (82–144). Whiteness is constantly on display in public spaces, including the space of academia from which I write this paper. With that in mind, I need to acknowledge my own whiteness, and the somewhat therapeutic and personally political motivation for doing the work I do (Friedman 1998: 41–47).

The bearers of whiteness so often pretend to neutrality. We refuse our ethnicity, while playing on its potential for advantage in the main streams of money, power and political clout. That is the reason why 'seeing white' becomes important as a response to the semiotics of privilege. It is not just a statement of the obvious, although it is that too, to remind oneself and others that the power of white is supported through literary tropes, filmic device and narrative function, semantic niceties, poeticism, rhetorical versions of hygiene and medicine, as well as the bias

of representation. Whiteness is made invisible by its promiscuity in the public realm. It slips between discourse and constructions of the real so that it is hard to pin down, except of course in the fact of its power. My argument is that even the seeming trivialities of whiteness are conducive to the maintenance of widespread inequalities based on a notion of race, and that seeing these trivialities is, at present, a step that needs to be taken over and over again.

Seeing white is a political act, whichever way you decide to look. There is a necessity that whiteness *is* seen, for its colonial successes have been built upon in an age of so-called multiculturalism through its disavowal. One day, ideally, the mutable descriptions of skin tone will become an irrelevance to how power is distributed. Until then, visibility is a necessary stage, for without visibility there is no way of marking the responsibility for white people to acknowledge the fact of their privilege. My thinking about whiteness is located in work I have done on how film offers unique forms of publicness, through an acculturated narration of the political imaginary (Donald 1998, 2000). This distinguishes between an operating public sphere, which can be institutionalised or activated at a political level, and publicness, which claims simply that there is such a thing as cultural space. In the context of the visual arts, it is likely to emerge differently according to the place, time and expectations of the audience and its political context. Whiteness may not be recognised as such by audiences of white ethnicities; nevertheless, the semiotic address of whiteness will hail them as white and enlist their understanding. I take issue, therefore, with the claim that there is no symbolic whiteness at work in social cultures. Race is a discredited construction, but it is one that survives in part by connecting itself to other powerful discourses of oppression. Whiteness is attached to the female gender in ways that compromise the sexuality of white women, while reiterating the masculinity of white males. It is associated with the cultural 'purity' of children in ways which remove it from history and absolve it from itself. Such compromises and reiterations ultimately reinforce a social reliance on whiteness as an ordering principle in power relations across 'race' groups. The visibility of the white female is both public and privileged, but it may also be symbolically manipulated as part of an insistence on the essential masculinity of white ethnicity. To this end, I argue that whiteness, even if it is a discourse *rooted* in constructions of race (or in the Chinese case of race *and* class), is progressed through gendered and generational representations.

This account is based, in the first instance, on two films from the 1940s and 1950s. Both are transitional works. *The White-haired Girl* (*Baimao nü*) (Wang Bin and Shui Ha, China, 1950) is known as the first revolutionary film made after the liberation of China in 1949. It is a document of achievement, but also of consolidation of the new order. *Black Narcissus* (Powell and Pressburger, Britain, 1947) comes 2 years after the end of the war. The film-makers, also noted for their wartime dramas, tell a feminised allegory of the loss of empire that is both wild and morally claustrophobic. I also discuss two pieces of art from the 1990s (Jiangjie's *The Magic Flower*, 1998 and Helen Chadwick's *Piss Flower*, 1992). In these films and installations, the female is characterised by a whiteness that produces a public narration of race and class, which simultaneously excludes and contains the female.

Transculture and Publicness

Publicness is strategically and qualitatively different from place to place, time to time, and from one ideological field to another (Fraser 1993; Negt & Kluge 1993; Kilian 1998). The resonance between institutionalised public action and cultural public space can only be found within the terms and conditions of its emergence, and not against a foreign ideal of how people should communicate with each other and with the state. Nevertheless, communication does happen across cultural and national boundaries—and one way of explaining that sometimes happy fact might be that public spaces have, simultaneously, structural and symbolic similarity and difference. But where are these spaces, and how might we recognise them across cultures and from different contemporary positions? More cogently, how do such recognitions allow us to look back at our local publicness and comprehend the structures of our own perversions?

I teach a course on Chinese and British national cinema, and therefore often find myself watching films from these cinemas in close succession. The differences strike me, but so do oblique similarities. In *The White-haired Girl*, a young girl, Xi'er, escapes from tyranny by hiding in a mountain cave. Her hair turns white as she lives on mountain berries that affect its pigment, reducing her to a caricature of an old widow left to die alone. Meanwhile, the landlord exploits the peasants' fear of the 'mountain demon' to maintain his power. Finally, Xi'er is liberated by her lover, now a member of the Liberation Army forces. She returns to live in her village, and, in the last sequence of the film, racing clouds and profusions of white blossom crown her renewed black hair (Meng Yue 1993: 120–123).

The white-haired girl's hair is a complex signifier that serves plot and ideology very neatly. White hair is associated with ghosts, transforming goddesses like the Lady Linshui/Whitesnake, old age and sexual rapacity (particularly associated with the Guanyin in the context of fertility), while whiteness on theatre masks signifies jealousy (Baptandier 1996). These connotations are not good, but there is an alternative signifying chain of whiteness. Whiteness of skin (white jade) is part of the discourse of feminine beauty, whereas inner goodness or chastity is 'pure white' *qingbai* (Schafer 1973: 89) Meng Yue has already argued very shrewdly that the story, in this film and in subsequent versions, desexes the girl until she is 'renewed' through the male agents of the Party. Thus, her song on the way up the mountain on the night of her escape: 'I will not die, I will survive, and I will have revenge', is only vicariously true. The narrative takes her sexuality hostage while she waits for the men to sort out the problems of class and brutality from which she fled. Her transformation makes the villagers think she is a demon or ghost, and only the soldiers can recognise her and restore her feminine possibilities. This ambiguity is reminiscent of the whiteness of pearl maidens, dragon princesses and fox fairies, who work through a deadly eroticism in Chinese literature and myth, and who are generally 'tremulously white, like bleached silk, like a white lotus, like soft moonlight, like drifting snow' (Schafer 1973: 89). Her whiteness is a marker of her ordeal, but also of her invisibility, and that of the child she conceives in the original story. It also emphasises her class purity in contrast (literally) with the dimly-lit landlord—

a black class element (*hei*). Purity (*qingbai*) is not gender specific; men and women can be politically 'good', but the double signification of whiteness as good *and* ghostly seems significant in its association with a sequestered female.

In *Black Narcissus*, a group of English and Irish nuns are sent up to a remote palace in the mountains of Tibet to start a hospital and school for local inhabitants. Here, whiteness overtly organises the narrative along lines of race rather than class purity. That is not the white that we are encouraged to *see*, however. Racial positioning emphasises difference-as-blackness, and conflates that difference with other traits (wantonness, vanity, fecklessness, savagery and so on). Meanwhile, the nuns are wearing flowing white robes. The choice of garb is clearly associated with their symbolic status as 'brides' of Christ, although the terms of their agreement are different from the marriage vows. These nuns are not in the Order for better or worse, they renew their vows annually. Much of the dramatic tension of the film's narrative focuses on Sister Ruth, who is a 'problem', and who does not renew her vows. She orders herself a scarlet dress from Calcutta, and on the first night of freedom, shakes loose her dark-red hair, applies her lipstick and runs through the night in pursuit of the one white man available. When he turns her down, she tries to murder her supposed rival, the sister superior (Sister Clodagh) played by the young Deborah Kerr, fails in the attempt, and falls down the mountain to her own death.

Julian Petley describes this film as 'surely one of the most truly hysterical films ever made' (Petley 1986: 106). It is always classed as a melodrama, and Peter Wollen has noted its compositional closeness to a musical score, which aligns it with a modernist concern to bring film to music (Wollen 1994). *The White-haired Girl* is also a melodrama; it is also 'truly hysterical' and is highly dependent on the score for its internal cohesion and impetus. But what is the nature of this hysteria? Is it, as Petley implies, simply that female psychodramas veer into the hysterical if the libidos in question are not quenched and married off with dispatch? Diegetically, hysteria seems well founded. The white-haired girl has been raped by her employer and flees for her life up a mountain. The nuns are sent to do good works in a place where natural beauty (cloaked in pure white snow) and very fresh air take their collective religious breaths away, tempting their minds and bodies beyond the fall of the white cloth. But more than this, the hands of the film-makers produce a textuality that is excessive, whether it be the darkly lit scene when the crawling hand of the lecher-landlord reaches for the Xi'er's neck in *Girl (Baimao nü)*, or the striped forest through which Sister Ruth runs in a madness of desire. This excess, derived from the fear of desirous female bodies, is displaced into the rich melodramatic texture of the films' narration. The vanishing point of the excess is, ironically, placed on the bodies themselves. They are whitened in ways that makes it impossible to see their sexuality, but equally impossible not to look for it. In both films, then, white, the metaphorical colour of chastity and of absolute beauty (white jade skin/Snow White) in Chinese and Christian cultures, is coded as mask of female sexuality. In both films, too, women thus coded are removed to a mountain top, until—in two very different scenarios—they return to the lowlands of civilisation. In the first, there is a triumphant return to the arms of masculinity and the then new Chinese horizon.

In the second, the descent is from grace to desire, and without male acquiescence, it is a deathly fall. The second point that refers the two films is that the strategy of colour coding, by which they designate female absence, transfers agency from the woman to masculine, institutional authority; the Party and the Church. My argument then is that whiteness is double-coded. Its racial and racist effect is to privilege certain women in the eyes of the spectator. This signification is underscored in both cases by an appeal to religious imagery, and in the Chinese case to the discourse of revolutionary class politics. In both cases, too, the double coding works *against* the women as women, turning their excessive whiteness against their sexuality.

A Bush of Ghosts

Two years after the end of World War II, and one year after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the marking of woman as *either* white *or* consumed by desire for the male (whether it be appropriate or not), is a reminder that the achievements of wartime women were significant but culturally problematic for the national imaginary. In Britain, to give a rather concrete example, while the taboo on married women working was broken by war work, the 1947 Royal Commission on Equal Pay was still biased against women's labour on sexist grounds:

In many respects the report of the Royal Commission on Equal Pay (October 1946) seems symptomatic of what happened to women after the war. Delaying their response until June 1947 the government affirmed, as a general principle, 'the justice of the claim for equal pay for equal work' but stated quite categorically that 'this principle could not be applied at the present time' because of the expense ... Which would not be in the 'national interest'. (Perkins 1996: 266.)

The 'national interest' is male and marked as such by economic decisions. My suggestion in relation to the films of the period is that woman is not marked, or rather she is 'disappeared' into the masculine preserve of whiteness. This complicates perceptions of ethnic whiteness, which is often unmarked to the subjective advantage of 'white' people. As Ruth Frankenberg argues in the introduction to her collection on theorising and thus *displacing* whiteness, whiteness can be made visible from the perspective of outside interests and experience; 'communities of color frequently see and name whiteness clearly and critically, in periods when white folks have asserted their own "colour blindness" as well as in times of self-conscious white claims of superiority' (Frankenberg 1997: 4). It is a curious phenomenon that the unmarked colour of whiteness is already invisible in white culture, but is also used strategically to deny visibility to inimical forces within that same cultural group. Therefore, the whiteness of the sisterhood in *Black Narcissus* is on the one hand played off against the blackness of the Tibetan population (especially the sexy young Prince whose supposed vanity attracts the nickname *black narcissus*), and on the other is used to hide the attributes of 'blackness'—secular desire in particular—where it might appear in white women. In this defensive move, the strategy of whiteness is used as a secondary mask, whereby the doubling of whiteness in the

nuns' robes (and perhaps in every bridal gown) hides the fear that whiteness might be 'normal', but the essence of that status is not stable and must be protected (Sandoval 1997: 96).

The discourse of whiteness is not as generally associated with Chinese racial discourse, although there are strong arguments to suggest that within Chinese cultural production, bodies are made significant along lines of ethnic difference (Gladney 1994). Visual representations of non-Han peoples tend to be differentiated by the brightness of the clothing depicted rather than the darkness of their skins (Landsberger 1995: 162–163). This effects an erasure of non-Han identity except as a performance of otherness for libidinal pleasure. Han identity is normalised in distinction to the assumed exoticism and sexualisation of the minority and indigenous peoples in the territories of Taiwan, the People's Republic, and Hong Kong. The whiteness of the white-haired girl is not then apparently a 'racial' statement, but rather a convolution of references, including race, to exclusion, which foregrounds whiteness as a signifier of class purity. Her class status is complicated by the association of white hair with the world of ghosts. Recent research on codes of beauty also suggests that whiteness as a characteristic of race and beauty is overtaking class, with advice to women 'unabashedly promoting and confirming the supremacy of white skin' (Johannsson 1998/1999: 63). The connection with whiteness and racial discourses is latent in the spectral element of *The White-haired Girl* if we consider that hell is shared by foreigners who are themselves ghosts (*gui*). This ghostliness also then implies a peripheral status, and an isolation from the centrality of Chineseness. As Janet Lee has argued in her work on female missionaries to China, white femininity was enhanced by its civilising potential in *white society*, but was criticised as monstrous by *Chinese*:

Their own [women missionaries] violations of Chinese expectations for women were so profound that, rather than eliciting criticism for their breaches, they were conferred a new status as 'she-tigers' or 'elephants', which granted them the opportunity to do as they pleased. (Lee 1996.)

The elephantine whiteness of Victorian missionaries is a statement of absolute cultural difference on the part of those who 'named' them. Yet again, further reading of *Girl* begins to suggest that the move from the feminine to the monstrous is a habitual step. One implication of the white-haired girl's ghostly seclusion seems to be that only the agency of the Party, personified in her soldier lover, can remove her from purgatory and re-establish her humanity—which is cast along gender specific lines. Or, and also, as her whiteness is a badge of class purity, it positions her between the darkness (*hei*) of class impurity, personified by the rapist-landlord, and the agents of change, the soldier-lover, who *sees* her whiteness as both pure (*qingbai*) and unfortunate. She is marked out as spectral (ghostly and ghastrly), in need of redemption, having been too closely penetrated by the dark. Xi'er's release becomes a symbolic re-entry into the world of men from the prison-cave of monstrous ambiguity. The penultimate shot of white blossoms comes as an ideological afterthought, re-inscribing the eponymous centre of the narrative within a visual discourse of political purity. In this shot, the narration draws a floral curtain over the

period of her non-human-ness, when she was without the custody of men, yet was also an abject victim of masculine penetration from the wrong class.

I am not suggesting, therefore, that the two films are working from identical cultural or ethnic bases, rather that the *strategies* of containment of the female are remarkably similar. The narrative of *The White-haired Girl* is structured to remove the girl at the same time as using her to focus the plot-line. As the victim of the piece, she is marked twice: by her class itself, a discourse with racial connotations and that operates as the normative 'goodness'; and by the de-sexing mark of whiteness-as-death. The nuns in *Black Narcissus* are also marked as good and pure, and racially explicit, but are simultaneously de-sexed by the demands of their ghostly deity-spouse. In both films, there is a close relation between the anonymity of the ghost and the invisibility of the woman outside socially legitimate sexuality. These disappearing acts produce a contradiction in both cases. In *Girl*, this opens up between the foreignness and danger of the ghost, and the good class status of a particular female subject. In *Black Narcissus*, it lies between the assumption of white racial supremacy within the film, and the danger of untrammelled white female desire. Bell Hooks' observation that Black Americans have known the White as 'mysterious, strange, terrible ... a bush of ghosts' adds another dimension to the *Black Narcissus* story. When the nuns finally leave a place to which they have no claim, the Tibetans might well remember these failed colonials dimly as a 'bush of ghosts' (Hooks 1996: 31–32).

Strategic Encounters

Women artists of the 1990s are still grappling with whiteness, although maybe not with an eye to the undertones of race that run through popular culture, and are evident in the hysteria of national cinemas. Helen Chadwick's performance sculpture *Piss flower* works through the transformation of desire into whiteness. To make the piece, Chadwick went out with her lover into a snowy field and peed. She then made a mould from the shape of the hole that their hot urine had burnt. This is the piss flower. A flower that takes its form from lovers' pee constitutes both a homage to, and a mockery of, the passing purity of a snowfall. It reminds us that the whitening of female sexuality seeks to contain the tense ambiguities between a racially exclusive representation of the female gender and the perceived impurities of female sexuality.

I was reminded of Chadwick's piece when I visited the 'In and Out' installation exhibition, curated out of the Earl Lu gallery at LaSalle College of Arts in Singapore by Binghui Huangfu. The title is drawn from the curator's inspiration to disrupt expectations of Mainland Chinese art held by diasporic Chinese and non-Chinese communities (and, vice versa, some of the artists are Australian citizens), and to 'ambiguously hint at all of the variations implied by the linking of opposites. The works examine the notions of artists working in a cultural structure whilst at the same time not being recognized by that culture'.¹ One of the intentions of the exhibition was to transect culturally specific public space, literally the gallery in this instance, with works that speak across imaginaries other than the Chinese, while

addressing the experience of Chinese ethnicity in and out of China. Jiangjie is the one woman artist represented here.² Her work *The Magic Flower* is inspired partly by the yin/yang cycle of giving and receiving, and partly by the writings of the French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. It consists of a white plaster egg-shaped bowl, imprinted with the image of a kneeling woman (*nü*) and filled with translucent plastic. This 'magic flower' is placed on a plinth 1 meter away from a series of small corner-shelves, where small male dolls stand one above the other, bandaged and pierced with acupuncture needles. These men-dolls are three-dimensional convex statuettes, they are 'out', the woman is a two-dimensional impression in the heart of the flower, she is 'in'. Jiangjie's aim is to demonstrate a relationship between men and women that acknowledges gender difference but does so within strong indications of cultural specificity, here Chinese. In an interview with the curator, she explains: 'her understanding of Simone was that she (Simone) saw things that made women different from men in terms of their female physiology, psychology and language, but that these things only underpinned the need to be concerned with a much wider social and historical context' (see note 2). For Jiangjie, this context is Chinese but its address is international. Her white plaster flower displays Chinese gender relations by removing the woman's substance and filling the impression it leaves on the plaster with transparency. She takes up no space at all, although the white 'flower' into which she disappears dominates the space of the installation. The implication seems to be that woman is contained by the flower, but that the process of containment exceeds the discursive boundaries of its own production.

National narratives: Modalities of Avoidance

Finally, I wish to tell another story, the deliberate conflation of ascription and proscription in Australian national media. This is a description of the invisibility of whiteness as the thematic key to cultural discourse. Again, I use a cross-cultural performance, here to emphasise the 'violence' of western applications of symbolic whiteness in cultural production. I begin with a family film about revolution, guns and childhood bravery in The People's Republic of China. I conclude with a brief survey of *Playschool* and an Australian cattle station. I shall argue that the ways in which violent national memories are contained in political film-making in a revolutionary society resonate with the avoidance techniques, or what we might call the 'modalities of avoidance', of children's television in the modern Australian context. Modality is here the spectrum of available meaning of semiotic and linguistic indicators, particularly mediated images. What Rey Chow and Žižek have described as the unknowability of the Real, and the symptoms that attach to its modal flexibility (Chow 1998: 33–47), a linguistic philosopher, Horst Ruthrof, understands as the impossibility of exactitude in communicative action (Ruthrof 1984: 97–108). Taken together, their insights form a political accusation; if a word, an image, or a string of indicators are specifically chosen to avoid the key contextual clue to their meaning, then modality is in the service not of inevitable confusion, but of deliberate obfuscation.

This is a national imagination in which recent memories of genocidal practice and

the associated violence of assimilation has been largely ignored or disavowed. As Gelder and Jacobs have argued, one of the strategies of avoidance is assimilation of key aspects of indigenous ethical practice into mainstream Australian political rhetoric (Gelder and Jacobs 1998: 42–44). The language of tradition and the sacred are potent in contemporary Australia (at the 1999 Anzac Day Gallipoli memorial service, a white politician called the killing ground an Australian ‘sacred site’), and this is arguably not just a seepage of Aboriginal discourse into the mainstream, but also a collective admission of the necessity of Aboriginality to White Australian perceptions of itself (Gelder and Jacobs 1998: 97–98). Nevertheless, in politics, society and the media, Aboriginality is never represented as quite ‘Australia’ (Mickler 1998: 263). It is originary, excessive, or sacred, but always thus subject to the low-level violence of integration and, as Mickler argues, to the virulent violence of exclusion or political denial (300–301). White Australian values and aspirations are consistently privileged as the markers of an Australian national ethos and personal security. Whiteness is both omnipresent and irresponsibly disavowed, so that the acknowledgment of one’s privilege, a necessary first step in building multi-ethical respect, is avoided. I adopt ‘ethical’ as in the usage of Jürgen Habermas:

By ‘ethical’ I mean all questions that relate to conceptions of the good life, or a life that is not misspent. Ethical questions cannot be evaluated from the ‘moral point of view’ of whether something is ‘equally good for everyone’; rather, impartial judgements of such questions is based on strong evaluations and determined by the self-understanding and perspectival life-projects of particular groups, that is, from their point of view ‘good for us’ all things considered. (Habermas 1998: 215–216.)

This notion of ethics can be developed not only to avoid the partiality of dominant moral systems, but also to install horizontal structures of respect as the condition of citizenship. It does contain a universalist assumption of common goods as a point of entry. Nevertheless, the transfer of priority from ethnicity to the ethical is useful in the critique of Australian multiculturalism. In particular, it can be used to invoke the ethical implications of imaginative processes.

Children are a significant part of the process of ethical recognition or refusal. The language of suitability and education that is employed when considering media for children is often reductionist, or peppered with absences. At the same time, the process of mediating to children bears a heavy weight of educational moral imperative, which in itself moves against the possibility of ethical diversity. The prime subject and spectator of these media processes is the child, marked as the vanishing point of normal, politically desirable national subjectivity. To understand this process, it is helpful to listen outside one’s usual sphere of reference. The assumptions of others can be useful in illuminating one’s own prejudice. The ideal process of media education in revolutionary China has been described as ‘mentally healthy’.³ In contemporary Australia, a normative ideal is described as ‘multicultural’. The critique I pursue here takes as its text that these terms are the ‘something else’ inserted to excuse or expunge memories of violence. The effect of the ‘something else’ is to conceal the modal spectrum that underlies the media products involved.

The effect of naming such products ‘mentally healthy’ or ‘multicultural’ is to limit the development of the dynamic to which the terms are presumed to refer.

The application of such terms becomes then an act of integration. The political discourse of multiculturalism is based on a concept of communities clustering around and within a dominant and white national identity. It is progressively stripped of the requirement to explore the process of living together in discreetly connected ethical modalities. Habermas notes in his ‘Levels of Analysis’, that indigeneity and multiculturalism are subject to different protocols (Habermas 1998: 211–215). This is important advice. In Australia, multicultural populations arise mainly from flows of migration at different historical junctures. These populations bring ‘histories’, cultures’, ‘political mores’ and so on with them, and they retain a point of reference outside the Australian continent. Indigenous populations are in a different position. The very fact of settlement has at some level denied absolutely their history, cultural ethics, and political and legal organisations. The incommensurability of the indigeneous person and the settler can only be breached by a dual act of recognition on the part of the settlers (Ang 1997: 57–59). They must recognise the ethical sovereignty of the indigenous culture, both in its traditional and contemporary modes. Where (white) (Australia) fails is just in this process of recognition.

Red and White: ‘Less Sex, Less Love, More Fighting’

Public children’s television is concerned to teach a multicultural and reconciled child-public the way forward to a less biased Australian national imaginary. The cross-cultural comparison I propose gives a critical insight into the intentions and outcomes of the ABC. The comparison originates from comments made by Yu Lan. Director of the Childrens’ Film Studio in Beijing, founded in 1981. Yu Lan was a famous actress in the 1950s and 1960s, taking the leading roles in *Revolutionary Family* (*Geming de jiating*, 1960) and *Living in the Heat of Battle* (*Lie huo zhong yong sheng*, 1965). Her new role as guide and guardian of children’s film culture is one which she takes very seriously. She remembers her own heyday as a time when the studios produced ‘mentally healthy films’, with ‘less sex and love, more fighting’. These films should not be considered violent as the combatants:

were protecting their country. They had been oppressed by others. Anyway these films do not *just* show blood and guts. [implication: there is context and principle involved]. What is violence? Violence in film is about personal hatreds. It is about familial, tribal and generational hatreds. *Romeo and Juliet* is violent. We ought not to portray such hatreds too much in film. We should aspire to united and peaceful society. It would be terrible if there were always fighting around. (Yu Lan, interview in Beijing 1998.)

Yu Lan’s point is that violence in certain contexts—namely national contingencies, particularly oppression or invasion by ‘other’ peoples—is *not* violence. An implication of Yu Lan’s position is that conflict within society is intolerable (not mentally healthy), but that conflict between those designated legitimate and (non-

Chinese and Chinese) enemies of the people and state is a transcendent category. The actual violence was necessary for national survival, and its cultural articulation in national memory is fundamental to the continuation of Liberation. What might be called violence in another context is marked as childish enthusiasm, masculine heroics, feminine stoicism, and the will of the masses.

Chinese revolutionary film-making of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s tended to figure children in one of two ways. Children were sometimes shown in flowery, peaceful surroundings where they needed to learn the values of good citizenship and socialist propriety. In one of these films *Flowers of the Motherland* (*Zuguo de huaduor*, 1955), a soldier brings back tales of battles (in Korea), but they are told, or his letters are read, in tranquil parks or on a school outing to the Summer Palace. The tension in such films lies in the child's ability to fully assimilate into adult political mores. Two of the children in *Flowers of the Motherland* are too individualist and cannot be accepted as members of the Young Pioneers. They are inspired by the soldier hero to do better. Films of this type ask, can this child, these children, be educated? The answer is, invariably, yes. The other major genre is the story of the child soldier. Child soldiers fought on both sides in the civil war. Films of national memory, however, tend to isolate their soldier heroes. This is not, I think, so much a denial of the existence of young fighters, but rather a discursive way of emphasising youth as a privileged carrier of national significance. Too many, and the children become banal victims of slaughter. In Quan Shanshi's 1961 painting, *Unyielding Heroism*, a large group of weary but unbowed soldiers stand around the draped body of a fallen comrade. One soldier stands out from the rest as his back is pictured and he occupies the foreground plane. He is shorter than the others, one child among men; his presence sanctifying theirs. In revolutionary films, the narrative structure is typically that a child, or occasionally a group of children (as in *Red Children* (*Hong Haizi*), 1958), sees parents or close relatives die at the hands of an enemy (Japanese or Nationalist). The child is then drawn into the struggle and becomes in some way associated with the Eighth Route Army. His (almost invariably) heroism helps his older comrades secure a major victory. In the most successful of these films, the child also undergoes a personal journey of maturation. He is not just red (*hong*) but also good (*hao*), and vice versa. The two qualities go hand in hand. In *Flowers of the Motherland*, the two children who learn to be good are rewarded with Young Pioneer red neckscarves. In *Little Soldier Zhangga* (*Xiao bing zhangga*, 1963), he is given his own gun and a holster to go with it.

This is the film that every respondent over about 35 years old called to mind as a 'good' children's movie (in interviews in Beijing in 1998). *Xiaobing* is about a 12-year-old boy, Zhang ga. His family is involved in the Communist struggle against the Japanese. A Japanese commander shoots his brave grandmother, which starts Zhang ga on a quest for revenge. His immediate motive is personal, but in the course of his journey, he assumes responsibility as part of a group, risking his life to aid his mentors destroy a garrison and rescue prisoners. Despite the dynamism of the adventure narrative, the main interest for the spectator is in the boy's naughtiness. He wants a gun more than anything. He fights boys in the village over a wooden gun, loses an unloaded gun provided by the Eighth Route Army, and finally gets his

own by chasing a hapless soldier through the river and fighting for it. His maturity is confirmed when he confesses to this unreported acquisition at the end of the film. He is rewarded with a holster to keep it safe, and a bullet.

Xiaobing is a war film made a decade and a half after the war is won. It is about regeneration, the containment of memory, and national history. The eponymous presence of the child lightens the tale for consumption in a period of relative peace (after the famine and before the Cultural Revolution). Nevertheless, it reiterates a state of war with outsiders, and incorporates childish energy and play into the equation of national identity. Internal conflict is not an issue, unless it can be resolved by the climax. The dramatic conflict is that in the child himself, between his urge to show off and his emerging adult duty to serve the cause and the people, as exemplified in the last scene, where he shares his food and his guns with the group. The conclusion that might be drawn from the externalisation of violence in the formation of state fantasy in *Xiaobing* is that other, productive, conflicts are disallowed in cultural life. They are not 'mentally healthy'.

Seeing White as Public Ethics

In Australian media of the late 1990s, the relationship between ethical (in)difference and the impossibility of childhood is also at play in public television for children. Watching these educational romps, it becomes apparent that the media is a space in which the memories of white state violence are negotiated for a contemporary imaginary. There is a relationship between state media products and the multicultural ethical conditions of a child-based audience. I have looked mainly at after-school programming on the public broadcasting system, the ABC, as the intentions there are clear and self-conscious. *Playschool* is the first show in children's afternoon television on the ABC. An identical programme format runs on television on the BBC in the UK, although with different presenters and themes. In May 1999, Australian *Playschool* did a programme about horses in the outback. The presenters, both young white actors, started with a cattle station that they (or the research team) had made out of corrugated cardboard, old boxes and lolly sticks. There was a table covering of dark red felt to represent the colour of the iron-rich desert earth. The station had a homestead, a water tank, plastic horses and two pens of black and white cattle. But no people. The pre-school audience was interpellated as 'the people', as the presenters' fingers moved the horses around the red mat marking the boundaries of the station. Although the use of a non-white, non-Anglo presenter does not guarantee a multi-ethical perspective, the undifferentiated white fingers dancing over the red cloth on behalf of all 3–4-year-old Australians was worrying. It was strange that the absence of any signs of indigenous settlement, employment, or existence was so marked in a public programme for pre-schoolers. In the rest of the programme, there were clips of horses being ridden by Whites around the lushness of the Blue Mountains, horses on their own, and a song about brumby driving sung by a sweet-faced (white) boy in a checked shirt. There was music played on bush band instruments (the bush bass and the lager stick), but not indigenous music. It was as though indigeneity is not only separate, but separable from white construc-

tions of rural life, maintained for a predominantly urban audience. Do the producers of *Playschool* imagine that urban Aboriginal and indigenous Australian children come home from school at a different time from everyone else? Or is it that they really do not notice the structuring absences of difference in the programme as they go through the round, square or arched windows? When Henry Reynolds asks, 'why weren't we told?', one reply might be that the 'Great Australian Silence' is not yet over (Reynolds 1999: 94).

This kind of assumed Whiteness is the modal norm in representing reality to children in Australia. There were two problems in this particular example. First, the omnipresence of whiteness in the presenters and the film clips. This makes the absence of plastic people on the cattle station bizarrely self-conscious. Granted, it was an absence that might have been devised as an anti-racist strategy, but this served to deny the political and social priorities accorded to whiteness in land-owning and land occupation in 1990s Australia. The cattle station was presented as neutral ground, where in fact in the history and the current politics of Australia, it is a hotly contested zone of occupation and use. The implication on *Playschool* is that children *may not* see the contradictions between the myth of the Australian homestead and the history of virtual enslavement, child removal and land squatting that lies at the root of rural development. In a modality of avoidance, the homestead is reinvented again at the end of the century, and only 2 years after the *Bringing Them Home* report, as a normal celebration of non-antagonistic rural identity (Beresford & Omaji 1998: 255–268).

So, why is *Playschool* violent in a similar vein as *Xiaobing Zhangga*, although both programmes are thought of by local adults as innocuous and suitable, 'mentally healthy', or 'multicultural'? It is violent in so far as it acknowledges the fruits of conquest, but not its suffering. It cannot recognise difference because it refuses to recognise itself. It operates a modality of avoidance that hives off contemporary difference, and associated memories of actual violence, into a never-never land of multiculturalism, which in turn sustains the low-level violence of integration. Revolutionary film culture uses a rhetoric of Chineseness, redness and goodness to mark out the cultural grounds on which violence disappears into one or all of those categories. In both cultural products, the challenges of multi-ethics are avoided. Despite the discrete situations of recognition that Habermas nominates in his account of the co-determination of political and ethical autonomy, I would argue that, at least in the Australian case, the racist exclusion of Aboriginality from the mainstream is not a deviance within an otherwise functioning multi-ethnic, multi-cultural migrant society. It is rather the symptom of settler racism that can at any time be re-directed against other minority or non-dominant groups, but which always returns to attack indigeneity.

I have explored two versions of racially loaded publicness in cross-cultural contexts. The aim has not been to declare similarities between unlike national cultures and state or public service media. Rather, the aim is to allow spaces of interpretation to open up within a performance of contingency; to see, in the collision between different ethical perspectives, a space of visibility. This is a call to the ethical requirements of the imagination, and to an empathy between knowing

subjects. Seeing white and seeing oneself as white is a step towards ethical and empathic respect, and a move away from the low-level violence of integration. The creation of cultural public space across and within national boundaries may not produce understanding or even agreement, but it may begin processes of recognition, acknowledgement, and debate.

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Notes

- [1] At the 'State Fictions: Post-National Realities: Cultural Perspectives on Institutions and Violence' Conference at the Academia Sinica, Taipei, June 1999, Liao Ping-hui questioned whether Guanyin was in fact dubbed 'sexual'. I leave in the reference, as even the dispute underlines the movement between sex and fertility according to race and gender of the travelled theorist.
- [2] Talk given by Binghui Huangfu 'Inside and Outside. A Forum on Contemporary Chinese Art and the Complexities of Cultural Exchange', a paper given at a symposium 'Cultural Difference' at the John Curtin Gallery, Perth, 29 April 1998.
- [3] The artists: Ah Xian, Guan Wei, Jiangjie, Li Tianyuan, Liu Xiaoxian, Wang Guangyi, Wang Jianwei, Wang Luyan, Wang Youshen and Wang Zhiyuan.

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