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White Panic or Mad Max and the Sublime

There were no Alpine precipices, no avalanches or volcanoes or black jungles full of wild beasts, no earthquakes ... Nothing appalling or horrible rushed upon these men. Only there happened – nothing. There might have been a pool of cool water behind any one of those tree clumps; only – there was not. It might have rained at any time; only – it did not. There might have been a fence or a house just over the next rise; only – there was not. They lay down, with the birds hopping from branch to branch above them and the bright sky peeping down at them. No one came. Nothing happened. That was all.

C.E.W. Bean (1945)[1]

Well, how the world turns! One day, cock of the walk; next, a feather duster. ... So much for history. Anyway – water? Fruit?

Aunty Entity, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985)

Soon, very soon, we will have to ... recognize that Australia is an off-shore island in an Asia-Pacific world of very dynamic and fast-growing societies and civilisations. If we continue to turn our backs on them ... we are doomed to isolation and insignificance as a nation.

Jamie Mackie (1992)[2]

A recent history of the relationship between immigration and foreign policy in twentieth century Australasia and North America begins by noting that while 'much had been written on the origins of the White Australia Policy, very little had been written on its maintenance'.[3] As in the United States, Canada and New Zealand, new notions of 'race' – linked to rising nationalism and emerging Social Darwinism, useful to the economic protectionism espoused by farmers, manufacturers and trade unions alike – intensified pressure to restrict Asian immigration to the Australian colonies during the later part of the nineteenth century. However, this does not explain how the policy effected by the first Act of the new

Australian Commonwealth in 1901 lasted as long as it did (1973); why Australian governments were vocal in defending it, while other countries with similar policies were much more discreet; nor why and how it was abolished. To answer these questions, Brawley looks to the international context of Australian domestic policies.

I am not a historian, but my abiding intellectual concern is also with 'how and why' questions of maintenance and change. The rhetorics of cultural studies sometimes incline us to give far more weight to the latter (change) than to the former (maintenance); doing so, we too easily rest content with a 'thin' account of the past that underestimates both the resilience of old stories and the complexity of *cultural* change. 'White Australia', for example, was not only a policy valorized by a set of beliefs instilled in people over decades, but a wild array of stories, myths, legends, rumours, images, factoids and ideas not necessarily coherent with the policy's aims or with each other – and always taking on lives of their own. What follows is a short and selective account of the life of one such story, 'the sublime', as it has been maintained, changed, even nudged towards its 'use-by date' in recent years, by Australian films in international distribution.[4]

Tracing a line of allegorical thinking *about* policy logics and popular myths of race that wanders through action and horror cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, I ask how such a calculatedly national cinema as Australia's has dealt with what David Walker calls 'the psycho *dynamics* of whiteness'.[5] For my purposes, John Barrell's study of *The Infection of Thomas de Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* offers the most useful model of these dynamics. In contrast to the 'apparently exhaustive' binary schemes of self/other, black/white, Eastern/Western, Barrell describes a triangular dynamic ('this/that/the *other* thing') which better captures the complexity and flexibility of White Australia as a historical formation.[6] Working through that dynamic, action films generically tend not only to experiment technically with 'special effects' of becoming-other but also to experiment rhetorically with the very fantasies of invasion by Otherness that politicians, journalists and intellectuals have invested in puta-tively 'white' popular culture for over a century.[7] I take cinematic thinking to be affective and energetic in character, reading films as events rather than as symp-tomatic statements. So I ask what these films *do with* cultural materials now often simply labelled and denounced as Orientalist, but which have been used as diversely in the past as they are in the present to transform historical clichés and to try out models for a *potential* national narration.

My purpose is less formal than this outline implies. I try to sketch an aesthetic genealogy for the remarkable rhetoric of menace used in recent times by some of the enthusiasts (for there are others, of which I am one) for enmeshing Australia culturally as well as economically in 'an Asia-Pacific world'.[8] Jamie Mackie's ominous

pairing of 'Asian' dynamism with Australian 'doom' in the passage cited above is only one example of an authoritative discourse, pervasive in recent years, whereby Australia is 'likened to a malaise that requires resolution'.[9] What follows is an argument against this discourse of doom, and the affective politics of 'white panic' that it exploits – and that the cinema I study explores.

Max and the sublime

In 1979, Dr George Miller ended one of the two main plot lines of *Mad Max* by symbolically exterminating the private sphere. The killing of the hero's wife and child cuts his last links to a dying order that divided social life between spaces of work and leisure, between time for mates (other men) and family demands, between war on the road and uneasy peace at home. In the most famous scene of the film, avenging bikers simply run down Jess Rockatansky (Joanne Samuel) as she flees with her baby down the highway. We don't really see the impact, but we do hear a thump as Jess falls down out of the frame, and then a child's shoe flutters on to the tarmac.

By Australian standards at the time, this was an appalling transgression. *Mad Max* provoked an outcry about violence in the cinema and, as Tom O'Regan recalls, people would 'remember from the film a violence in excess of what was literally there'.[10] No doubt this sort of 'false memory' can arise in reaction to any cleverly edited action sequence that works more by suggestion than showing; our imagination excessively completes the scene. The question still arises, what is being suggested? *What* do we imagine? Memories, versions, readings of any film will differ with the complex histories that spectators bring to a screening and the act of completing a scene. So what made *this* scene articulate so powerfully, for Australians, 'collective neuroses and fears'?[11]

Although we learn in a coda set in a hospital that Jess is not yet dead, the smashing of his family leaves Max (Mel Gibson) free to follow the other plot line – his struggle to *not*-become another crazy in a violently male, indivisibly anarchic world – towards the wasteland. Max survives to become the hero of two more films: *Mad Max 2* (a.k.a *The Road Warrior*, 1981) and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), the latter co-directed by Miller with George Ogilvie. The trilogy is now famous as a formally influential action epic about car crashes, homosocial subcultures and the end of the world as we know it. Yet while the films attracted attention internationally for their mythical force and strong visual style, Constance Penley summed up the early critical response to them when she dismissed the first two as exemplary of 'recent dystopian films ... content to revel in the sheer awfulness of The Day After'.[12]

In Australia, however, the social realist edge and the humour of these films more immediately inflected their meaning: the first film's vision of a bellicose car culture could be seen (by Ross Gibson) as 'predominantly naturalistic', while the formalist *élan* of the second film was grounded (as Stuart Cunningham noted) by insider jokes about Australian popular culture.[13] With the release of *Beyond Thunderdome*, critics soon began to read the Max films seriously as reworking 'Australian historiographical understandings'.[14] It is not hard to see why. Moving from a loss of family to a nomad/settler conflict (*Mad Max 2*), and then the making of a new society partly based (in *Beyond Thunderdome*) on convict labour, the Max trilogy revised the dreams and nightmares of white settler mythology as well as probing fears of a nuclear future. Rhetorics of movement, loss and alienation have often shaped the telling of histories in modern Australia, a nation created by and for trade flows, transportation, immigration and anxious dreams of conquering space.[15] Max is an emigrant with no hope of returning home; his is a story of displacement and traumatic severance, and it serves on many levels as a myth of origins projecting into the future a scene of repetition in which the repetitive ('on the road again', heading for the Unknown) can always be redeemed as a brand new start. However, it is also a story of sometimes violent *contact*. Max's adventures are all about the others whom he meets along the way, and how he slowly changes in response.

Moreover, the trilogy is not a simple 'Day After' story. It has an interesting temporal structure: the catastrophe is not only undramatized but diffused over time. In *Mad Max*, apocalypse is present as a potential of the spectator's present; the film always begins 'a few years from *now*', in a world a little worse than the one we know, and ends, some time later, with Max *en route* to a world worse again. At the beginning of *Mad Max 2*, an apocalyptic Oil War is already in the past, fictively located 'between' the first two films. But this beginning is narrated from the *future* of the events that *Mad Max 2* will go on to depict, and an opening collage of images, evoking a disaster that occurred before the narrator was born, mixes stills from *Mad Max* with archival scenes of war – as though Jess died during, not before, the conflagration. 'The End' is most vividly envisioned in these films as a running down, not a sudden, drastic rupture; time 'after' is clearly marked only in relation to Max's personal tragedy. The temporal setting of *Beyond Thunderdome* is also drifting, vague; it is 'after' *Mad Max 2*, Max is older; society is becoming more complex as a harsh law and politics replace the open savagery that succeeded, in the second film, the degenerative madness of the first; the continent of Australia is once again occupied by several different cultures, if still divided between those with access to power and those without.

As stories of contact, then, these films are also about the tensions between memory and history, personal and public time, repetition and singularity,

entropy and dynamism, banal and unprecedented events; at every moment of Max's trajectory from suburban bread-winner to road warrior to reluctant hero of legend, he faces problems of moving and acting between radically different orders of experience. This is one reason why the trilogy, with its narrative emphasis on 'sheer awfulness' and its emphatic poetics of landscape, resonates strongly with the 'plot of the sublime':[16] in modern times, a scenario in which a dynamic self, normalized white and male, is overwhelmingly threatened by a fearsome power of alterity; freezes in astonishment (in Burke's words, 'that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror'); then bounces back with renewed strength and vigour by making sense of the threatening power, while appropriating some of its force.[17]

Let me say three things about my interest here in the sublime. First, it is limited. The critical revival of interest in Anglo-American Romantic literature (prompted by Harold Bloom and Thomas Weiskel in the 1970s), and in philosophical aesthetics as a discourse on the 'transport' of thought towards its limits (Lyotard) has produced a body of theory so vast and difficult that it has its own sublime effect.[18] I am concerned with popular or *casual* versions of the sublime, which often work with older and less overtly self-reflexive aesthetic ideas. Where serious post-Kantian readings generally think the sublime relationally as a problem of/for a subject caught up in incommensurability,[19] I want to keep hold of the vernacular use of the term to refer, in an 'essentialist' and often humorous way, to something treated *with admiration or respect* (for Burke, 'inferior effects' of the sublime) as the cause of a feeling of shock, amazement, or simply of being 'impressed'.[20]

Now, it is arguable that in an era when advertising ascribes sublimity to ice cream and tourism sells alterity, there is no popular sublime; there is only a theoretical discourse that *represents* the popular in terms of the excess, hybridity and confusion that Alexander Pope called 'bathos' in his 1727 satire on false sublimity, 'The Art of Sinking in Poetry'.[21] However, I prefer Anthony Vidler's emphasis on the inseparability of 'true' sublimes from those ambiguous genres, such as the grotesque and the uncanny, by which sublimity has been popularized and 'falsified' historically.[22] This approach makes it possible to say that popular sublimes corrode the possibility of making purely aesthetic distinctions between critical and popular discourse: their force is precisely to blur the finely differentiated categories multiplied by theories of the sublime, and to *produce* the 'numberless confusions' about the sublime from which theorists must always distinguish our own discourse before performing (as I just have here) another act of critical clarification.[23]

More significantly I want, second, to emphasize the historical variability of the scenario's contents and uses. For my purposes, it matters that the sublime in

Australia has had *practical* force as a story elaborated for a particular form of settler colonialism as it extended across the continent, Aboriginal land, and as immigrants from Europe began to think of themselves as 'close' to the vastness of 'Asia'. It follows that if the concept of the sublime always entails a limit-event of some kind, the now very large number of readings rendering that event variously in terms of modern European and American histories of gender (Patricia Yaeger), sexuality (Lee Edelman), slavery and racial terror (Paul Gilroy), individualism (Frances Ferguson), nationalism (David Simpson) and 'heady imperialism' (Weiskel) may need to be cited with caution in other contexts.[24] In Australian white settler literature, for example, the 'language of the sublime' was, as Peter Otto points out, invoked 'well into the twentieth century … by travellers, explorers and writers as a discourse appropriate for an encounter with an alien land or people', and the 'language' was primarily Edmund Burke's.[25] Britain's invasion and settlement of the Australian continent began in 1788, and *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (first published in 1757 and 1759) was widely read by the early colonists; Robert Dixon has shown that they used it as 'a basic handbook – even in the field' for ordering their responses to 'scenery'.[26] However, it is often a *failure* of that language of the sublime, a mismatch between handbook and field, model and experience, that precipitates in settler texts the 'plot' of the sublime; it is from the botching of a first, formal exercise in 'European vision' that a struggle ensues to reconstitute a way of seeing and reappropriate descriptive power.[27]

'There were no Alpine precipices,' writes C.E.W. Bean in *On the Wool Track*, rehearsing with a magisterial eloquence the sublime *topoi* that do not describe 'the country where men have died'. In their place, as Christina Thompson points out, is a 'nothing appalling and horrible' that is itself so appalling and horrible that its power as 'a nothingness which is actually something, an immensely powerful, active force' *is* the thing of which men die:[28] for Bean, it had 'actually done them to death' (p. 2). Practised in this way, the sublime displaces the often bloody human conflicts of colonial history with a pale metaphysics of landscape in which Man confronts the Unknown (forces routinely capitalized at this time). Aboriginal peoples are written out of this scenario as it creates its *terra nullius*, no-one's land; if in North American popular culture the Western genre conceded that violence occurred between settlers and indigenous people, in this country 'there happened – nothing'. Bean's text is subtly explicit on this point, as the 'effects of blackness' that terrified Edmund Burke are set aside with the cliffs and the avalanches: 'There was some danger from blacks – not a very great risk. The real danger was from the country itself' (p. 2).[29]

Bean's extraordinary account of death by thirst in country that was not a desert but 'looked like a beautiful open park with gentle slopes and soft grey

tree-clumps' (pp. 2–3) exemplifies *how* a Burkean aesthetic was popularized in Australia: encountering the limits of that aesthetic, white settlers made new clichés; describing a different country, they made national myths. In a book published a year after *On the Wool Track*, Bertrand Russell would rattle off the 'old' European clichés as they were used by the young Kant: 'Night is sublime, day is beautiful; the sea is sublime, the land is beautiful; man is sublime, woman is beautiful; and so on'.[10] Australian writers of a metaphysical bent could be moved well into the 1950s by the *problem* posed to them by this schema: what is 'Man', if little of his world seems beautiful and may prove deadly when it does look beautiful; if the land is more terrifying than the sea; and if the night brings relief from 'the demon dread of day'?[31]

What, then, is 'woman'? The third thing that interests me about the sublime is the way that popular versions tend to complicate rather than bracket (as most recent theoretical treatments have done)[32] a symbiotic relation to the Beautiful understood right up front as feminine, sociable and domestic (in Bean's terms, 'gentle' and 'soft'), but also as *unreliably oppositional* to the sublime; staging a sort of failure of binary thought, popular sublimes may grapple more intensely with problems of similarity, resemblance and convergence than with 'critical' questions of difference. However, migrant nostalgia can introduce a stabilizing element here, whereby the contrastive force of the Beautiful is most securely preserved *in time* as a lost 'home' or 'mother country' accessible only to memory, while persisting in space as an inaccessibly distant place. Graeme Clifford's film *Burke & Wills* (1985) performs this double movement in an instant at the end of the opening sequence, when a scene of gentlemen and ladies playing at being lost in a lovely green English garden maze is displaced by a frame-full of 'nothing' – the endless desert in which the explorers will lose their way, and die.

In this intensely clichéd movement, women disappear; left behind in time as well as space, they too are consigned to the order of memory. The most stable opposition, then, is that which organizes a division between past and present, or between the past and all time *after* an event or a moment that produces this division and renders it absolute. Such a twisting of narrative time into a 'then' and an infinite 'after' has its effects on conceptualizing the future; happy endings, the resolution of a disequilibrium, the achievement of a sociable balance or a 'return' to a state of harmony, become more difficult to achieve.

Inside/outside: phobic narrative

Consider the sentimental or 'bathetic' version of the sublime at work in Hollywood films about aliens. These days, such films often express a desire for

reconciliation with 'E.T.': *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* is paradigmatic of this desire, on which the *Alien* trilogy, with its logic of convergence between murderously self-sacrificing human and alien mothers is a perverse variation, and the best rendition I know has a classic figure of sublimity as its title: *The Abyss*. However, optimistic contact allegories of this kind are rare in classic Australian cinema, which emphasizes fantastic animals (*Long Weekend*, *Razorback*) or supernatural forces channelled by mystic Aborigines (*The Last Wave, Dead Heart*) rather than extra-terrestrials, and avoids happy endings – especially the bellicose triumph for 'our' side reclaimed by Hollywood in *Independence Day* – unless these are legitimized by self-mocking, send-up comedy (*Crocodile Dundee, Marsupials: The Howling III*).

Much more common in the Australian action cinema of the 1970s and 1980s was a double reworking of, on the one hand, the thematics of the colonial natural sublime (deadly space, isolation, 'nothing') with, on the other, that peculiar dread of the future as the *outcome* of an inner decay already menacing the 'race' that has haunted Social Darwinist narratives since the later nineteenth century.[33] This has been by no means a uniquely Australian dread. Significant numbers of intellectuals in most Western countries were obsessed by it until after the Nazi Holocaust; globally popular spin-offs of *Rosemary's Baby* and the *Omen* films continued to exploit its broad folkloric appeal; postcolonial governments, too, have used it to produce their own 'narratives of national crisis'.[34] However, it is hard to exaggerate the influence of the twin scenarios of 'race suicide' (that is, miscegenation between 'fit' and 'unfit' persons and classes as well as races) and 'white peril' (falling birth rates among white Australians as compared with the 'sheer terrifying numberlessness' of the populations of a deliriously totalized 'Asia'[35])that circulated *in* Australia during the very decades at the turn of the century in which the modern nation was shaped.[36]

So it is not surprising that these bizarre, apocalyptic scenarios, obsessed with 'breeding' and 'degeneracy' rather than love or sexual morality and with population 'bombs' rather than pods from outer space, should have fascinated film-makers creating a new national cinema in Australia after the late 1960s, when Social Darwinism was at last formally discarded as a legitimizing narrative of state. The film revival of the 1970s 'played' in a climate of heady anti-imperialism, sexual liberation, and cultural revolution. Five years before *Mad Max*, Peter Weir's horror-comedy *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974) used a car-crash allegory to pillory the racist insularity and heterophobia of a nation that had found it logical to go to war in Vietnam to 'stop them coming over here'. A small town isolated in the middle of 'nothing', Paris cannot tolerate change or difference but, in reality, it feeds on strangers. Parisian women do not bear enough children for the town to survive: so, like the mutant cars that terrorize the streets, Parisian

patriarchy reproduces by making over the remnants of the car-crashes caused by the men.

This macabre and very funny parable about a paranoid, exclusionary society with a cannibalistic immigration policy opened up a whole series of scary narratives in which a white group or couple is contained in a 'safely' closed space – whether a house (*Shame, Phobia*), a remote town or farm (*Wake in Fright, Turkey Shoot*), an isolated beach (*Long Weekend*), a boat (*Dead Calm*) – which is invaded by an outsider/other and turns into a trap, or is revealed to be itself a prison that accelerates the community's tendency to degenerate from within. This second nightmare of insularity, an entity's potential for disaggregation by an *internally* proliferating otherness or 'infection', is often forgotten these days by critics of British Australia's obsession with being invaded or 'swamped' by outsiders. However, it is integral to the 'peril' projected by the population sublime. A fear of 'in-breeding' invests the invasion scenario with intense ambivalence, with desire as well as hostility; the fearsome power of alterity is always needed to save us from ourselves.

Correspondingly, problems of control and mastery may be most acutely posed not by 'aliens', but by the go-betweens or *carriers* who exemplify contact between inner and outer worlds and, quite commonly in cinema, between genres.[37] Thus a long tradition of European family melodrama about 'bad blood' informs the horror of Colin Eggleston's *Long Weekend* (1977), in which a corrupt white couple, having sinned against Nature (the man casually kills animals, the woman has had an abortion) is driven mad by 'nothing' – birds, a dugong calling her lost calf – in the bush; the sound of the mother dugong's grief *carries* between the human and natural orders, shattering the woman's brittle urban shell. In action films, peril is more overtly externalized as the enormity of other people: this is the terrain of *Mad Max 2*, in which a weakened, vestigially heterosexual band of white-clad settlers marooned in the wasteland, dreaming of a beach with 'nothing to do but breed', confronts the greater violence of the black-leather queers, sadists and degenerates ravening around their fort. With his 'terminal crazy' tendencies and ascetic post-sexuality, Max himself is the carrier, of violence and salvation, *par excellence*.

These films work with a way of structuring historical materials that I call, 'phobic narrative'.[38] Widely used in the media to frame economic and political debates about Australia's future, phobic narrative constitutes space in a stifling alternation of *agoraphobia* (fear of 'opening up' the nation to an immensely powerful Other, typically now 'the global economy') with *claustrophobia* (fear of being shut away from a wider, more dynamic, typically 'Asian' world): pressure accumulates in this way on the figure of the border between forces pushing in and forces pushing out. History is then caught in an oscillation between

entropy, a slow running down of closed, communal time, and an explosive temporality of *catastrophe* unleashed by the Other coming from elsewhere. The driving force of phobic narrative is then a pre-emptive desire for avoidance: how to avoid invasion at one pole while avoiding isolation at the other; how to avoid stagnation while avoiding revolution and disruption.

In practice, this repetitive swinging between opposite extremes of anxiety about the future can serve to shape not a quest for national 'identity' in the European sense (invoking an ideal unity of language, 'blood' and territory), but a pragmatic emphasis on solving 'how?' problems of becoming, rather than 'who?' or 'what?' questions of being. Accordingly, there is sometimes a perceived gap between the virulent rhetoric of phobic nationalism in Australia, and the *relatively* low levels of physical violence attending actual conflicts over the nature and future of the nation.[39] For this very reason, however, the question arises of phobic narrative's recurring power to shape those 'Australian historiographical understandings' (in O'Regan's phrase) that came to inform *Mad Max*. Any revision of historical materials creates a remainder, something left over each time; we may think of this as an edge of difference or as an incommensurability, but it can also be something that *returns* as an element excluded from differing versions of a story, securing their similarity.

Phobic narratives of Australian national space clearly worry over the possibility of at least one specific form of historical repetition. The simplest way to render this is to consider that both the colonial sublime of landscape (the 'nothing') and the Social Darwinist sublime of population (the 'numbers') entail invasion scenarios in which white people are victims. In the first, the bush and the desert act as inhuman agents of a depopulation: tales of lone white men dying of nothing in an 'uninhabited' land condense and censor a history of Aboriginal deaths and black resistance to white settlement; responsibility for colonial violence passes to a homicidal land. In the second, the coast is a permeable barrier against waves of *over*-population rolling in from the future ('Asia'). This figure operates most powerfully in a register of paranoid anticipation, and if the scenario it organizes often spatializes the future threat in terms of a particular country (whether China, Japan, Vietnam or Indonesia), its basic structure is able to accommodate any number of ethnic, racial, religious and social prejudices, including a generalized anxiety about the economic impact of immigration itself; it was common for nineteenth century English settlers to express fears of being 'swamped' by *Irish* immigrants, and complaints are heard today from Australians of many ethnic backgrounds that too many New Zealanders are now 'allowed in'. At the same time, this vision of the future carries a pressing mnemonic force that secures a chain of displacement: saying that invaders will come by sea, we admit that it is we who came by sea, and something we did to others becomes something that

happened to *us* and could happen all over again; on the beach, we replay our genocidal past as our apocalyptic future.[40]

Daiwei Fu has pointed out to me that this use of the sublime is not exclusively European. Aboriginal people in Taiwan recall an old myth (similar to one attributed to Native Americans in Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*) that predicted a future in which large numbers of Han Chinese would come across the water to the island, and people in Taiwan today have their own fears about overwhelming numbers of people across the water even as TV and tourist promotions pour out images of 'the sublime of mainland China'. This Taiwan-centred comparison helps to clarify the *constitutively* Eurocentric, practical force of the sublime in Australian settler culture, for it is precisely the latter's imperviousness to intimations that its materials might *not* be unique or distinctive which helps to secure a myth of identity based in a lonely, cosmic fear.

'Terror in the Bush', or the Risks of Maternity

Thus it happens that a woman, peacefully sunbathing alone on a quiet, idyllic beach, will raise her head for no obvious reason and look around with an unaccountable sense of unease. It is almost mandatory in action films that a shot of calm, beautiful scenery anticipates terrible events; in Australian film, an idyllic beach scene in particular marks a *premonition* of repetition, running in reverse Burke's 'plot' of delight as the aftermath of danger or pain, a 'tranquillity shadowed with horror' (p. 34). In *Mad Max*, Jess hears seagulls, sees 'nothing' along the beach; the dog has run off, but dogs do that; she gathers her things and heads for home through bush that looks like a beautiful park, with gentle slopes and soft grey tree-clumps.

I am not sure where I first heard the phrase 'white panic',[41] but it always comes to mind when I watch the next scene. As I understand it, this phrase refers not to white bodies *in* a state of panic but rather, by metonymy, to that hallucinatory blurring or bleaching out of detail produced *by* the blinding heat of panic. Such panic is 'white' in that it erases differences from the field of sensory perception; panic motion is clumsy and uncontrolled. Fittingly, then, panic for theoreticians is not strictly a sublime emotion. Panic is a response to an objective cause of some kind, and it is a precondition of the modern sublime that we are not really in peril: for Thomas Weiskel, 'if the danger is real we turn and flee, without pausing for our sublime moment'.[42] At the same time, he clarifies that anxiety is also subjective in that it is retroactive: 'the threatening occasion appears to revive a fundamental fantasy of injury and escape ... played out hypothetically (pictured to ourselves) in the phenomenal terms of the occasion before us' (pp. 84–5). In other words, a work

of memory is involved when we recognize a danger; we panic when something tells us we have seen this movie before.

Watching a film, any spectator is in a complex, doubled position in this respect. In a cinema, we can certainly savour our sublime 'moment' if what we see stirs feelings of panic; watching a video, we can replay the occasion and 'pause' it as many times as we wish. However, the social '"givenness" of subjectivity' that Rey Chow calls 'pregazing',[43] already caught up as it is in larger historical processes of interpellation and recognition, ensures that such feelings are also *retroactive*, and not only in relation to the formal dynamics of identification with a camera, a gaze, an editing principle and so on. However rarely it happens to film-literate people, we can perfectly well be panicked by a non-cinematic fantasy or a memory in some way played out in the phenomenal terms of the cinematic 'occasion before us'.

Mad Max is not the only film to have made me flee the cinema (at a blundering run quite unlike the lucid 'walking out' that signifies distaste), but it is easily the most memorable; the first time, I didn't make it through Jess's headlong flight through the bush. A cut takes us from behind Jess as she leaves the beach to a frontal view of her walking cautiously up the slope through the trees. As noises thicken in her sound-world and chords stir nervily in ours, she hesitates; the camera comes in closer and a strange cry curdles the air; Jess stops, bites her lip and looks around. Abruptly, we see men running behind trees in the distance! – but does she? or do we see them from the perspective of men closing in from the other side? Suddenly, we are behind her: in the most aggressive movement in the film, the camera lunges at her back; she screams, she turns – and from Jess's point of view we see 'nothing', a frame-full of beautiful bush.

From here, the scene plays out what is for many people a powerful *cultural* memory, 'terror in the bush'. As urban souls who see the bush from planes and cars or on a nice stroll in a National Park packed with tourists, many Australians know about this terror while never having felt it. Without warning or reason, a person or a group (it is a highly contagious form of fear) is overwhelmed by a feeling of being watched from all sides, caught in a hostile gaze rushing in around the 360 degrees of a circle; panic flight is a common reaction. This is how D.H. Lawrence described the experience in his 1923 novel *Kangaroo*:

... there was something among the trees, and his hair began to stir with terror, on his head. There was a presence. He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all. He turned to go home. And then immediately the hair on his scalp stirred and went icy cold with terror. What of? He knew quite well it was nothing. He knew quite well. But with his spine cold like ice, and the roots of his hair seeming to freeze, he walked on home, walked firmly and without haste.[44]

Often used naively to document how Europeans 'felt' about the Australian bush, this passage is a formal exercise in the sublime. The narrator not only describes his terror of an overwhelming presence, but also the turn of his mastery over it ('firmly and without haste'); control is crucial to the sublime, whereas panic is a feminizing state because it tends to involve a failure of control. Relayed by critics and historians, however, the passage also laid down the canonical literary account of terror in the bush as Lawrence went on to ascribe 'the horrid thing in the bush!' to 'the spirit of the place', assimilating this in turn to 'a long black arm' and then to 'an alien people' watching (again) its 'victim' while patiently 'waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men'.[45]

More mundane explanations can be given of terror in the bush. When I first felt it as a child, playing with a friend not ten minutes run from her house, my father told me it was only sheep or kangaroos peering at us from behind the trees. At the other extreme, it can be theorized away as a purely cultural phenomenon, a 'white guilt' acquired (but how?) in infancy. Despite its racial romanticism, Lawrence's version is at least capable of admitting, like *Mad Max*, that terror in the bush involves not only a response to something powerful in nature *and* a narcissistically bounced, accusatory historical gaze, but also a fear of the actions of other human beings. 'Panic' is a good name for this compound sort of fear; in Greek mythology, Pan was a hybrid creature, half-human, half-goat, who made noises in the woods which terrified people.[46]

Pan was also a lustful god. Like the 'obscurity' and 'darkness' prized by Burke as productive of the sublime, woods and 'low, confused, uncertain sounds' (p. 83) carry special terrors for women and vulnerable men.[47] Rational fear of rape and murder saturates the scene of Jess's terror: three more times we see her see 'nothing' as we see the bikers come closer while the cries grow louder and unmistakably human and male; she falls, and her beach-wrap flies open up to her waist. This scene terrified me because the editing 'joined' my own vivid memory of terror in the bush to the knowledge all attentive spectators will share that 'the horrid thing in the bush!' is, in this instance, not a 'spirit' or 'a long black arm' but a bunch of crazy white men.

Clearly, the chase scene splits along gendered lines the white Australian 'we' I have been using to this point. If *Mad Max* portrays a society disintegrating into two groups, hunters and hunted, this is the scene in which the feminized side of that dichotomy is elaborated paradigmatically (Jess crashes into a bird, then the corpse of her dog, and then a lumbering, childish man). Routinely splitting the narrative image of woman from the movement of the narration,[48] it induces in at least this female spectator the sense of externalization that makes most rape scenes alienating. Yet something else drifts across this division, holding Jess's image as woman in the historical field of *white* panic composed by the articulation of the natural with the population sublime.

For me, this 'something' is neither a memory nor a 'fantasy of injury and escape', but a trace of a knowledge acquired from other texts and stories and brought to bear, retroactively, on the scene. Jess in *Mad Max* is not simply a woman. Jess is a *mother*, her abstract status affirmed by the generic name 'Sprog' (a colloquial term for offspring) that she and Max have given their child. Only in the beach-bush-house sequence is Jess a woman alone; in every other situation of danger, she carries Sprog in the posture of an iconic 'mother with child'. This sequence in fact mediates between two other chases in which a child is menaced: near the beginning of the film, the Nightrider tries to run down a toddler on the road; near the end, the Nightrider's mates run down Jess and Sprog. At this level, the narrative is organized by a triptych of victim figures: child, woman and mother-with-child.

What happens if we see Jess in these scenes as black? If we hallucinate her as an Aboriginal mother, fleeing terrified with a gang of white men in pursuit?[49] As well as restoring a still often suppressed dimension of sexual violence in Australia, we retrieve a scene of racial terror crucial to national history but almost never dramatized in mainstream national cinema.[50] At various times, most intensely between the 1920s and the 1960s, all Australian states forcibly took children away from Aboriginal families, placing them in state 'homes' or in white foster care, with the aim of assimilating them to white society. Inspired by utopian-futurist forms of eugenics, extreme proponents of this policy hoped it would result in the 'biological absorption' of Aborigines by white people in a few generations.[51] While this genocidal programme was unrealized, failing at the time to win public support, its monstrous fantasy of exploiting black women and children to build up White Australia's 'numbers' against the *external* threat of the future/'Asia' passed rapidly through the media into popular lore about the population 'problem', and the children were no less cruelly taken from their mothers.[52]

Once their stories of terror and privation are not only included but made central in 'Australian historiographical understandings', we might one day be able to see the ferocious pursuit of the mother in *Mad Max* as an allegory which, at the beginning of a period of profound transformation in Australian society away from the twentieth century model of racist mono-culturalism, comple- mented and partially revised Bean's elegy for the white men dead in the bush. These passages complement each other not when we notice that Bean wrote a history of Man while *Mad Max* opened a space for the experience of women and children (in this they diverge), but when we can see both as enacting the displacement that founded the 'national culture': Jess is, of course, white, but more significantly there are no Aboriginal people anywhere in her world. However, the dystopian futurism of *Mad Max* changed the traditions it drew on – and

deeply shocked its first audiences – by projecting a mythic landscape and a (future) past in which *something* happened (telling in fiction a terrible historical truth), while showing us unequivocally that 'the real danger' for all in this landscape was not, as Bean imagined, from 'the country itself' at all.

Nobody, somebody: women of the future

From this premise, different stories can begin to be told. If the future remains an object of dread, it is less predictable; open to change by human actions, endings become an object of experiment and even happiness a narrative option. I have space here only to suggest some directions for further discussion by jumping over to the images of the future in *Beyond Thunderdome*.

By the third film, new peoples are creating themselves by alliance and improvisation; there is no nation, and no state to administer a population. Presumably, the Northern Tribes who set off for Paradise at the end of *Mad Max 2* are still breeding away on the coast. In the desert, a White Tribe of children is living in a lush lost valley, the 'Crack in the Earth': looking like ragtag extras from a Hollywood jungle movie, their style of life is adapted from Tom Cowan's *Journey Among Women* (1977), a lesbian-influenced film about a new society founded by women convicts, and their 'fecund haven concealed in the blasted interior' is an old motif of Australian fantasy literature.[53] Then there's Bartertown: a wild, hard-trading, frontier city, formally invoking the Hollywood biblical or Roman epic with its pell-mell costume clichés ('African' warriors, 'Roman' soldiers, 'Arab' souks, an 'Asiatic' despot), with 'British' colonials and global media icons tossed into the mix, but threaded together by the East Asian motifs – a headdress here, a tattoo there – that make Bartertown unmistakably a desert descendant of today's fantastic, hyper-capitalist Pacific Rim.[54]

Each group is developing a distinct political system. The Northern Tribes are patriarchal. The White Tribe is a sexually egalitarian gerontocracy (older children lead) and Bartertown is dominated by a single woman, Aunty Entity (Tina Turner). While always signifying herself, 'Tina Turner' is styled here as 'Cleopatra-esque', and thus is coded, in the old Hollywood manner, as an Oriental woman of beauty, ferocity and power; ruling by public rituals of punishment ('the Law') and behind-the-scenes intrigue, Aunty uses a deft combination of forced labour and environmentally sustainable technology to build Bartertown on a Pharaonic scale.

Max, ever the go-between, provokes an encounter between those two futures. From the crossing of White tribalism with entrepreneurial multiculturalism emerges a third future, the mixed society that salvages the city of Sydney

('Home') at the end of the film. Unsurprisingly, Home offers the best of both worlds. Like Bartertown it is innovatory, but it remains egalitarian like the Crack in the Earth. Unlike the Crack in the Earth, it is technologically based. Unlike Bartertown, subject to the violence and spectacle of the Law, Home is made socially cohesive by a communal practice of narration and memory. Home's leader, Savannah Nix (Helen Buday), is a white woman who embodies the best of both sexes. A warrior *and* a mother, Nix is a compulsive historian: she makes the people recite their history every single night of their lives.

It is easy to produce a series of binary oppositions between Nix ('Nobody') and Entity ('Somebody'); the film invites us to do so. Nix is to Entity as white is to black, innocence to sophistication, idealism to pragmatism, memory to forgetfulness; and also as history is, not to nature (a dualism made meaningless in *Mad Max*), but to *economy*. Aunty Entity is a business woman. If her view of history broadly resembles Henry Ford's ('history is bunk'), as she explains her approach to Max it more exactly recalls a philosophy associated with the late Fred Daly, a much-loved Australian Labor politician: 'one day, cock of the walk; next, a feather duster'. However, for Aunty, history's *content* is not a struggle for justice but a random play of individual survival and opportunity: 'on the day after, I was still alive. This Nobody had a chance to be Somebody. So much for history.'

Yet there is a double historical displacement going on around the charismatic figure of Tina Turner. She is a black ruler in the Outback, in the place of the Aboriginal women who never figure in this epic (a displacement which provoked some controversy in Australia when the film was released). She is also a woman in charge of an Oriental-multicultural trading zone in which, despite its lavish iconic diversity, the only woman from Asia in sight is tattooed on the Japanese sax-player's back. So if we decide to read *Beyond Thunderdome* as a significantly Australian film, there is a sense in which we can say that troubling issues of race and gender in representation are *peripheralized* by the figure of 'Tina Turner'. I mean this literally: all through the trilogy, glimpses of other stories (the Feral Kid with his boomerang in *Mad Max 2*, the saxophone player himself) flash by in the 'peripheral vision' of the narrative. At the same time, this whole saga of the destruction and rebuilding of society is all about those peripheralized figures, and the roles they play in other stories of depopulation and repopulation, war and migration, historical dominance and economic power.

If we stay with the opposition between Nix and Entity, it is clear that the film sentimentally resolves their conflict in favour of the brave new world built in Sydney by Nix. Hers is the good way forward, and it leads to the future that the Australian Labor government of 1983–1996 promoted in its utopian moments: an open, tolerant, enterprising, 'clever' society, creating new industries or recycling the debris of the old, welcoming people from everywhere, while retaining

the *good* old white Australian values of collectivism, historical consciousness and care for social welfare. These are virtues distinguishing Home from brutal Bartertown, where atomized, competitive individuals must fight for their lives without a safety net.

If this is a sentimental resolution, it is also a phoney one. As a happy ending, it didn't take; *Thunderdome* was the most costly and the least successful film of the trilogy. At the level of the economic allegory of survival always subtending the national cinema, Tina Turner's presence is primarily a sign of the global distribution and massive budget of the film; she is 'in place' for marketing purposes. And on screen, Aunty is a lot more fun than Savannah Nix. Aunty has wit, sexiness, style, humour and a real affinity with Max; she exudes a lively cynicism more in tune (I venture to assert) with Australian popular culture than Nix's tense, puritanical fervour; a media creature, Aunty inhabits the big-screen spectacle of *Thunderdome* with grace, consistency and ease. In contrast, Nix, for all her social *bricolage* and home-spun historiography, is perhaps less a portent of the future than a nostalgic reminder of the more primitive technical conditions in which the first *Mad Max* was made.

When we ask how Max mediates the dyad of black and white heroines, the happy ending is more ambiguous. Max cannot join the maternally nurturing utopia of Home any more than he could really live in an infantile lost valley; cut off from Nix's future by the searing knowledge of his past, Max admits the spiritual congeniality of the un-maternal Aunty by staying in the dystopia where each has thrived: Max, by devolving from lawman to 'Nobody' ('The Man With No Name'); Entity, as a Nobody enabled to become the Law. To the end, then, something *grates* about the figure of the white mother-and-child.

Something always did. Even in *Mad Max*, only Jess and Sprog truly live the inhibiting ideals of normality, order, control; almost all the other characters are already, one way or another, social 'feather dusters', except Max's mate Goose (Steve Bisley), the road war's first casualty. Max himself is a waverer, afraid of becoming one of the crazies he is meant to control – which is exactly what he needs to do in order to survive. As O'Regan points out, the death of his wife and child *makes* Max; once 'Mad', he can avoid the ' "vegetable" fate of his mate', survive the apocalypse and enter the new world.[55] This has often led feminists to take a dim view of the films, particularly since casting white women as 'God's police' – moral guardians of community, enforcers of social law – is an old colonial tradition.[56]

Yet Jess herself is a lot more fun than Savannah Nix, to whom the 'guardian' cliché better applies. We are not incited to rejoice at Jess's fate, and so *Mad Max* is all the more shocking for the directness with which it offers a cure for the 'psycho dynamics' of white settler history: imagine a future, even narrate the nation, without recourse to the biological mother-with-child. This opens another series

of questions about the impact under colonialism of the concept of population. If we read allegorically for ways in which the iconography of white Motherhood displaces other histories of sexuality and race in the national frame, it is crucial also to attend historically to this icon's luminous negativity in much Australian popular culture; consider Barbara Baynton's cry of outrage at frontier society in her horrifying story 'The Chosen Vessel', first drafted in 1896, about a young bush mother murdered in front of her baby.[57] Why is the 'private sphere' of reproduction (in Burke's terms, the white Beautiful) so often cast as an obstacle to the emergence of a brave new world?

One approach would consider the practical force of a more complex aspect of the sublime than the basic themes I have set out here. It is useful to bring Lyotard's analysis of 'the event' and the terror of death in Burke's sublime to bear on the anxiety about mothers in phobic national narratives, and on the apocalyptic hyperbole of the narration. Lyotard argues that Burke's sublime is 'kindled by the threat of nothing further happening'; he reads Burke as a theorist of the event and 'the question of time' ('*Is it happening?*'), for whom the greatest terror is that '*It*' will stop happening in the ultimate privation, death.[58] This is why the sublime is a revitalizing experience: since a healthy soul is an agitated soul, ever ready for the next event, the 'exercise' of the sublime (Burke, p. 136) simulates and overcomes a fear of being 'dumb, immobilized, *as good as dead*' (Lyotard, p. 205; my emphasis).

It is clear that the unhealthy lassitude threatening the 'nerves' for Burke (and the power of art for Lyotard) is a feminizing 'evil' (Burke, p. 135) associated more readily with bourgeois home life than with war or rebuilding a city. Equally, it is clear that Lyotard shares Burke's disinterest in the eventfulness of *birth*; for neither thinker does the concept of 'labour' (or terror) have maternal connotations. In eugenic mythology, however, the event of a birth can bring into the world the most dreadful of deaths, slow, collective, inexorable: one can never be sure exactly what a woman is 'carrying', or whether a threat to the future of a family, community, nation, or 'race' will successfully be contained.

In this context, Lyotard's account does get at something crucial about the myth of the mother-as-carrier reworked by the *Mad Max* trilogy. Herself a go-between who bodily mediates (in this discourse) inside and outside worlds, the mother can be a bearer of a 'peril' from the *past* as well as of hope or fear for the future. Sweet, suburban Jess errs on the side of an inadaptive inheritance; with her, a whole way of life that is no longer viable is destroyed. Futurist Nix, in contrast, is able to reconcile the dynamism of free trade Bartertown with the commemorative hyper-activity of the protective Crack in the Earth, where the White Tribe fends off 'slackness' (their term for cultural degeneracy) by telling agitated stories of an apocalyptic event.

Again, a historiography is invoked by these tales of dynamism and slackness, one whereby the sublime organizes 'othering' tropes into a vision of Australian society as a catastrophe waiting to happen – if not in a collision between (their) powerful and (our) feeble energies, then as an inner Nothingness spreading unopposed. Consider D.H. Lawrence, writing in *Kangaroo* about an Englishman's perception of Australian urban democracy: 'The *vacancy* of this freedom is almost terrifying. ... Great swarming, teeming Sydney flowing out into these myriads of bungalows ... like shallow waters spreading, undyked. And what then? Nothing' (pp. 32–33). Again, Lawrence was not the only writer to find Australians suffering a deficit of the spiritual vigour that comes from a bracing exposure to terror; in this highly selective account of history, popular culture was constituted for decades as an oscillation between stupor (for example, Ronald Conway's *The Great Australian Stupor*, 1971) and nihilism (Manning Clark's 'The Kingdom of Nothingness', 1978).[59]

Fictively remedying what is only a deficit in critical vision, no longer thinking history 'through' the body of the mother, the *Mad Max* trilogy tries to transcend this culture of futility and its compensatory, ennobling stories of 'heroic failure' – stories at the heart of the conquistador vision of Man confronting 'the land'. *Beyond Thunderdome* may fail because it does strain for transcendence, while leaving Max in the wasteland as a hint that there might be a *Mad Max 4*. However, as Gibson says, it is significant that Max doesn't die, that the land doesn't kill him, and that he, unlike Bean's victims, succeeds 'in *living*, rather than escaping ... into apotheosis'.[60] For my purposes, it is equally important that the vitality of the 'Home' Max can't desire is signified by the child Nix holds in her arms as she tells the city's survival stories, and by the image of a mother assuming the power of historical narration.

Going outside

This is only a story, one of many to use lucidity and humour to salvage something from twentieth century Australia's 'waning myths', and do something different with them.[61] However, stories do know a thing or two about the power and resilience of myth that scholars and politicians often seem to miss. If panics over immigration from Asia seem to be recurrent in Australian public life, how surprised can we really be – when so much official rhetoric of 'Asianization' addressed to us over recent decades has been marked by the very same panic, prompted now by economic rather than racial anxiety about the future? When, for example, Jamie Mackie issues the stern warning I cited at the beginning of this chapter – 'soon, very soon, we will have to be capable of meeting

[Asians] on their terms' – a truth is told with good intentions. In some ways Australia is indeed 'an off-shore island in an Asia-Pacific world of very dynamic ... societies', and yet this mundane truth is told by reanimating White Australia's menacing Asian sublime. To whom is this lesson addressed? Surely not to Asian-Australians. What is wrong with living on an off-shore island, and what power does Mackie assume 'we' have had, that we should find this humbling? What is an 'insignificant' nation? In whose terms is drawn this distinction between significant and insignificant nations? Whose gaze is being invoked? Must significant relationships be defined at the national level? What sacrifices are we asked to make by this invocation of an overwhelming 'other' power, on whose 'terms' we are asked to remake ourselves? Are these not, in fact, *Australian* terms, through and through?

It is remarkable how this imaginary simply has no room for the ordinary; for banal, friendly, unsensational contact, everyday mixed experience, the event of a routine birth. Everything happens in a frenzied and apocalyptic register. One of the best films to deal with this material, John Dingwall's *Phobia* (1988), imploded its conventions brilliantly by allowing the agoraphobic migrant heroine (Gosia Dobrowlska) to walk outside with no appalling or horrible consequences; her fear has been created by her Australian husband (Sean Scully) harping about her strangeness in an 'alien' land. Renate's discovery of the outside as an everyday, negotiable reality is lethal to the hyperbolic drive of phobic narrative, in which all events are on a grand scale and every encounter over-determined.

Going outside means talking *to* the people – in Renate's case, Anglo-Australians – cast as 'Them' in phobic narrative. This, too, is something scholars and politicians could learn from filmmakers, obliged as the latter are to tell stories for an irrevocably diverse world. Responding to the book that Mackie introduces, Alison Broinowski's *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Foong Ling Kong points out that this text, intensely critical of the past and present limitations of settler Australians, assumes that Asian women 'exist in a one-dimensional space and listen as they are spoken about; they do not hear themselves'.[62] In the process, it reconstitutes in its mode of address as well as its title the cultural closure it berates. Excluded from the field of 'Australian' impressions of 'Asia', Kong's writing as a woman who 'shuttles' between Kuala Lumpur and Melbourne is consigned by *The Yellow Lady* to the peripheral vision of history – another tattoo.

However, new modes of address are hard to develop and practise, failures are ordinary and helpful examples are sparse. I have been interested here in how one work of cinema, firmly based in the most uncompromisingly masculine myths of the white Australian tradition, changes them in definite ways. A study of the *Max* films, however, should above all provide a context for valuing the achievement

of less widely distributed, more evidently experimental films about action, domesticity and 'contact' made by women in recent years: Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1987), about an Aboriginal daughter caring for her dying white mother in a glowingly aestheticized desert; Pauline Chan's *Traps* (1993), in which a British Australian couple, absorbed in their professional and marital everyday, stumble into the beginning of an insurgency they can barely comprehend in French-occupied Indochina in 1950; Margot Nash's *Vacant Possession* (1994), where a white woman returns after her mother's death to her home at the 'national birthplace', Botany Bay, to face a father crazed by the Pacific War – and the family of her Aboriginal lover, whom her drunken father shot.

Such films are often relegated by critics to the worthy periphery of national cinema, as 'independent', 'feminist', or 'multicultural' films. Certainly, they mark the limits of the national cinema project classically understood; centred on the experience of women and children shuttling or shuttled around the world, they internationalize local knowledges of national tensions rather than helping to build a cohesive population in one place. However, I believe they are also creating, without panic or hyperbole, historiographical understandings for the future.

NOTES

1 C.E.W. Bean, *On The Wool Track* (Sydney and London: Angus & Robertson, 1945), pp. 2–3. Further references are in parentheses in the text.

2 Jamie Mackie, 'Foreword' in Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1992), p. v.

3 Sean Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America, 1919–78* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995), p. 1.

4 See David Carter, 'Crocs in Frocks: Landscape and Nation in the 1990s', *Journal of Australian Studies* 49 (1996): 89–96.

5 Walker, David (1995) 'White Peril', *Australian Book Review* September 1995, p. 33.

6 John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas de Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 10–11. I deal here only with a twentieth century triangulation, 'white/Aboriginal/Asian', as projected from the enunciative position (my own) of 'white' as 'this'. However, Australia has always been a multi-racial society, and other ways of triangulating social space have shaped its history, such as (in the nineteenth century) 'English/Irish/Aboriginal', and sometimes (during panics about Fenian terrorism in the colonies), 'English/Aboriginal/Irish'. For analyses of how the stakes of discourse about Australian history shift when the 'this' of Australian enunciation is not projected as 'white', see Ghassan Hage, 'Anglo-Celtics Today: Cosmo-Multiculturalism and the Phase of the Fading Phallus', *Communal/Plural* 4 (1994), pp. 41–77, and Foong Ling Kong, 'Postcards from a Yellow

Lady' in *Asian & Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*, ed. Suvendrini Perera (Melbourne: Meridian, 1995), pp. 83–97.

7 This does not mean that only people who identify as 'white' respond to these fears and fantasies, or enjoy films experimenting with them; nor does it mean that all or even most white people do so identify and enjoy. I am not concerned here with the problem of how we can know what different people and differing audiences 'make' of texts. Rather, I am interested in the related historical issue of what filmmakers 'make' of the materials of previous films, and studying this entails, in my view, a positive description of the recurring tropes of culture.

8 I owe my awareness of this rhetoric to Suvendrini Perera, 'Representation Wars: Malaysia, *Embassy*, and Australia's *Corps Diplomatique*' in *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader,* eds John Frow and Meaghan Morris, (Sydney and Chicago: Allen & Unwin and University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 17.

9 Kong, 'Postcards from a Yellow Lady', p. 91.

10 Tom O'Regan, 'The Enchantment with Cinema: Film in the 1980s' in *The Australian Screen,* eds Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (Ringwood, Vic. and Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 126.

11 O'Regan, 'The Enchantment with Cinema', p. 126.

12 Constance Penley, 'Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia', *Camera Obscura* 15 (1986): 67.

13 Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 159; Stuart Cunningham, 'Hollywood Genres, Australian Movies' in *An Australian Film Reader,* eds Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (Sydney: Currency Press, 1983).

14 O'Regan, 'The Enchantment with Cinema', p. 127. Along with those by Gibson and Cunningham such readings include Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, Vol. 2 (Sydney: Currency Press, 1988); Meaghan Morris, 'Fate and the Family Sedan', *East–West Film Journal* 4:1 (1989): 113–134, also http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/19/sedan.html; and Jon Stratton, 'What Made *Mad Max* Popular?', *Art & Text* 9 (1983): 37–56. Later readings with a national-historical emphasis include Delia Falconer, '"We Don't Need to Know the Way Home": Selling Australian Space in the *Mad Max* Trilogy', *Southern Review* 27:1 (1994): 28–44, while Mick Broderick develops the reading of the trilogy as a global postmodern myth that is favoured by George Miller himself: 'Heroic Apocalypse: Mad Max, Mythology, and the Millennium' in *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1993).

15 See Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966).

16 Peter Otto, 'Forgetting Colonialism (David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*)', *Meanjin* 52:3 (1993): 545–558.

17 The citation in parentheses is from Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* ed. J.T. Boulton (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), first published 1757 and 1759. Further references are in parentheses in the text.

18 See, respectively, Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973); Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Jean-François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde' in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Blackwell: Oxford, 1989), and *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

19 For example, Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); and Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

20 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 57.

21 Alexander Pope, 'The Art of Sinking in Poetry' in *Selected Prose of Alexander Pope*, Paul Hammond, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

22 See Anthony Vidler, 'Notes on the Sublime: From Neoclassicism to Postmodernism', *Canon: The Princeton Architectural Journal* 3 (1990): 165–191; and *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992).

23 The phrase 'numberless confusions' is from Paul De Man, 'Hegel on the Sublime' in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 139.

24 See Patricia Yaeger, 'Toward a Female Sublime', and Lee Edelman, 'At Risk in the Sublime: The Politics of Gender and Theory' in *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*; David Simpson *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, p. 6.

25 Otto, 'Forgetting Colonialism', p. 548.

26 Robert Dixon, *The Course of Empire: Neo-Classical Culture in New South Wales, 1788–1860* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 48.

27 Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

28 Christina Thompson, 'Romance Australia: Love in Australian Literature of Exploration', *Australian Literary Studies* 13:2 (1987): 164.

29 See Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, pp. 147–149.

30 Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1946), p. 679; see Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960 [1763]), pp. 46–48.

31 Otto, 'Forgetting Colonialism', p. 549. Otto is citing J. W. Gregory's account of his travels at the turn of the twentieth century, *The Dead Heart of Australia* (London: John Murray, 1909). Writers with these concerns in the 1950s include Ernestine Hill, Randolph Stow and Patrick White, while David Malouf's novel *Remembering Babylon*, which Otto reviews, was published in 1993 (Sydney: Chatto & Windus). For readers

unfamiliar with these texts I should stress that they represent only one strand of Australian literature. While landscape metaphysics has been valued highly by critics and historians of national culture, it has never been the only or even the dominant preoccupation of writers in Australia's predominantly urban society.

32 The most influential contemporary polemic against Beauty is Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 71–82. Significant exceptions to this tendency are Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), and Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993).

33 See Octavius C. Beale, *Racial Decay: A Compilation of Evidence from World Sources* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1910).

34 Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, 'State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore', in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, eds Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 343.

35 Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas de Quincey*, p. 5.

36 See Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze: Sexuality, Class and Surveillance* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993); Neville Hicks, *'This Sin and Scandal': Australia's Population Debate, 1891–1911* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1978); and Rosemary Pringle, 'Octavius Beale and the Ideology of the Birthrate: The Royal Commissions of 1904 and 1905', *Refractory Girl* 3 (1973): 19–27.

37 See Ross Chambers, 'Fables of the Go-Between' in *Literature and Opposition*, eds Chris Worth, Pauline Nestor and Marko Pavlyshyn (Monash University: Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, 1994).

38 Morris, 'Fate and the Family Sedan'.

39 On this phenomenon in controversies over Chinese immigration in the nineteenth century, see Andrew Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California, 1850–1901* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979).

40 See Meaghan Morris, 'On the Beach' in *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 93–199.

41 An obvious source of the concept, as distinct from the phrase, is the chapter on 'The Whiteness of the Whale' from *Moby Dick*: 'It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me ... for all those accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honourable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood.' Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1953 [1851], pp. 169–170.

42 Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, p. 84; see Burke, pp. 40 and 46.

43 Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 19–27.

44 D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950 [1923]), p. 19.

45 See John Carroll, ed., *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982); Manning Clark, *Occasional Writings and Speeches* (Melbourne: Fontana/Collins, 1980), pp. 46–47.

46 On the modern sense of 'panic' as a contagion which 'spreads' or is carried between people, taking on a political dimension in contexts of social crisis, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 198–211.

47 My thanks to Min-Jun Gu for bringing home to me the importance of this aspect of this scene.

48 On this splitting, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

49 I gratefully borrow the notion of reading as 'hallucination' from Naifei Ding.

50 The breakthrough film in this respect was *Rabbit-proof Fence* (2002), directed by Phillip Noyce.

51 Anna Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the South West of Western Australia, 1900–1940*, 2nd edn (Nedlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1992), pp. 316–325.

52 See, for example, Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1963 [1937]), pp. 225–232.

53 Gibson, *South of the West*, p. 162.

54 Bartertown also looks back, like the Crack in the Earth, to Australian popular fiction in the 1890s when Orientalist tales of a 'lost civilisation' in Central Australia enjoyed considerable success; see John Docker, *The Nervous Nineties: Australian Cultural Life in the 1890s* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1991).

55 O'Regan, 'The Enchantment with Cinema', p. 127.

56 Dermody and Jacka, *The Screening of Australia*, Vol. 2, pp. 177–178; see Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonisation of Women in Australia* (Harmondsworth and Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1975).

57 Barbara Baynton, 'The Chosen Vessel' in *Portable Australian Authors: Barbara Baynton*, eds Sally Krimmer and Alan Lawson (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), pp. 81–88.

58 Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant-garde', p. 204.

59 Ronald Conway, *The Great Australian Stupor* (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1971); Manning Clark, *A History of Australia*, Vol. IV: *The Earth Abideth For Ever, 1851–1888* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978), *passim*.

60 Gibson, *South of the West*, p. 175.

61 Ibid., p. 175.

62 Kong, 'Postcards from a Yellow Lady', p. 91. 'The Yellow Lady' is the title of an erotic etching from the 1920s by the painter Norman Lindsay, an enthusiast for White Australia. Reproduced on the cover of the first edition of Broinowski's book (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1992), this intensely 'othering' image was meant to define the book's object of study, not reiterate Lindsay's values. However, reproductions do reproduce; Kong's 'Postcards from a Yellow Lady' is an analysis of this problem.