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Performing the 1950s New Australian

Dirk de Bruyn

As a tentative beginning to locating a particularly local Australian brand of a post-colonial materialist (formalist) cinema this paper contextualises the recycling and re-samplings of mainstream industrial cinema that I have recently undertaken. I aim to place this practice within emerging discourses of hybridity, crossing-borders and a Global Cinema. This research speaks to my earliest experiences of migration into Australia, of becoming Australian, unfolding in my 50s childhood and enunciates the pressures my parents' migration placed on them. The focus of this work articulates the somewhat emptied and gutted voice of the New Australian, a 50s term for the assimilated migrant (CAB 1948) of which the Dutch were considered exemplar performers, good white New Australians, who neatly left their Dutch identity at the door but who never-the-less witnessed the ambiguities of the ideologies they implicitly embraced.

I voice my sampling and re-editing practices via a 1970s experimental filmmaking in which I initiated my filmmaking practice, an outsider move I now understand as a return, as re-performing my parent's marginality in this culture. I particularly resource Peter Gidal's 70s manifestation of materialist film (see Gidal 1989), subjugated and considered utopian and apolitical within Peter Wollen's *two avant-gardes* (Wollen 1982 [1975]) but which I have argued elsewhere returns in the digital situation of information overload and image hyper-malleability to express the impact and structure of traumatic experience (de Bruyn 2012). Having finally arrived as an Australian, I reclaim my parent's history by relating the history of my subjugated practice. I offer aspects of Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) and Martin Arnold's *Alone: Life Wastes Andy Hardy* (1998), as evidence of materialist film's recall internationally, as examples of a dialogue and re-integration of the avant-garde split that Wollen imagined and facilitated, and a method for unpacking the traumatic register of the 1950s New Australian identity. In the last part of this paper Arnold's method is used to reveal the ideologies impacting on the newly arrived migrant in the 50s. This textual analysis is performed in the re-editing of mainstream film material relating to this period of Australian history.

I begin with *Caché* (or *Hidden* as it is often referred to in English). The opening sequence of *Caché* unfolds as a 4 minute long single take of a surveillance tape of the street in front of the main character's home in Paris. The opening titles are inscribed over this shot. We hear birds and the sound of the street. A woman leaves the house. We begin to hear a puzzled conversation between a man and a woman (Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche as Georges and Anne Laurent) in the service of understanding this image. After a few minutes the speed-up, slowing down and freezing of the tape marks its material presence. The event that is being witnessed by these tapes is unclear/absent but somehow addresses, as the film later unravels in a more classic story telling mode, an unspoken, invisible transgression performed and resident in the denied and repressed distant childhood memory of the celebrity intellectual Georges Laurent and hard-wired irrevocably into its victim, a boy of Algerian descent, the presumed producer of the watched videotape. Like a flashback to this unknown event the surveillance tape locates the position of the invisible victim of this un-located trauma.

What uncannily re-surfaces in this opening shot are allusions to the cinema of a first avant-garde. The relentless duration and unexplained events in Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) come to mind, as does Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964) and the covered over trauma in the later *Landscape Suicide* (James Benning 1986). Duration as performed by Haneke in this opening shot is a central characteristic of such 60s and 70s formalist or structural film for which Peter Gidal later coined the term *materialist film* (Gidal 1989). This formalist cinema concerned itself with structure ahead of content and the pre-reflective moment of perception rather than dreams and fantasies. As P. Adams Sitney explains "the structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline" (Sitney 2002: 348). Gidal was this cinema's most extreme and radical commentator and practitioner. For Gidal materialist film is 'anti-illusionist' self reflexive non-representational foregrounding duration: "Narrative is an illusionistic procedure, manipulatory, mystificatory, repressive" (Gidal 1976: 4) For Malcolm le Grice this cinema's politics is implicit: "The political questions for formal cinema centre, not on issues of political content of the films, but on the political implications of the film's language, conventions and structure" (Le Grice, 1977: 152).

Wavelength's spine is a relentless 45-minute fixed-camera zoom across a New York loft from wide-angle into a photograph of an ocean wave. The background sound is an electronic sine-wave that correspondingly changes with the zoom from 50 to 19,200 cycles per second, creating nodal points of standing waves that move through the theatre with frequency changes. As *Caché* materially references itself to video, *Wavelength* reflexively marks itself as celluloid. Different film stocks and filters change the image's quality, its grain and intensity during the zoom's trajectory,

permitting at times a view of the street below. Sparse human action inserts into the film's 'narrative', similar to the incidental occurrences on the videotaped Parisian street. A woman supervises two men moving a bookcase into the room, a man staggers and falls to the floor and later a woman telephones to report a dead body in the room. Throughout, inexorably, the zoom asserts its position as the film's subject, as the tape performs in the opening of *Caché*.

When Simon Hartog, on speaking of *Wavelength* outlines Snow's intent "to make a film that has no explanation" (Hartog 1969: 3), he recycles Harold Rosenberg's commentary on Willem de Kooning's Abstract Expressionism as presenting "an event without an interpretation" (Rosenberg 1990/1972: 249). This is also the position in which the viewer is placed both inside and outside of *Caché*'s opening sequence and is at the heart of Soshana Felman and Dori Laub's portrayal of trauma as an "an event without a witness" (Felman and Laub 1992: 75), used to describe a process of testimony and witnessing that despite its fallibility, manages a direct and productive communication of its trauma. Such gaps and absences of dys-remembered events can return unexpectedly and viscerally in flashback form, challenging narrative comparable to the way the enigmatic tape mischievously corrupts the constructed life narratives of Haneke's main characters.

Landscape Suicide is an example of a formalist film that, in its gutting of content, speaks to Haneke's approach to trauma. Benning's durational examination of emptied landscapes to signify past and hidden traumas, performs Felman and Laub's traumatic witnessing. Benning's is a landscape whose silence bears witness to un-located bodies, memories the locals work hard to forget. These are brutal events defined by what is not said, glimpsed in Benning's turn from minimalism, captured in the phrase "less is more, but it is not enough." (MacDonald, 1992: 237) Benning explains his use of duration:

It always pleased me when people would tell they'd almost left but instead had stayed with the film and felt that the experience had taught them to look differently, to pay more attention and become more proactive as viewers, to look around the frame for small details and not wait for the film to come to them. (Benning in: MacDonald 2007: 435)

In *Caché* Benning's tension between leaving and staying with film is expressed negatively when the image is speeded up and fast forward lines of video become evident on the film screen. Georges and Anne Laurent show no patience, no ability to look differently.

Extending the concept of filming John Giorno sleeping for five hours in Warhol's *Sleep* (1963), an extreme work like Warhol's silent *Empire* approaches the experience of the sustained surveillance embedded in *Caché*'s perplexing tape. Screened at silent speed *Empire* lasts 8 hours and 5 minutes in the 'unprocessed' real time of the surveillance record. Beginning at 8.06 pm on July 25 1964 the film begins as a washed-out screen with sunset gradually revealing a lit Empire State Building: "Andy Warhol: The Empire State Building is a star!" (Malanga 2002: 87). An incidental seagull's flight, lights turning on and off, shifts in image quality, its grain and contrast responding to shifts in New York's light all play out over the film's duration. Through extreme duration the idea of looking continuously to include not looking, challenges a perceptual apparatus wired for mainstream cinema. As Warhol offers:

I like boring things. When you sit and look out of a window, that's enjoyable. It takes up time. Yeah. Really, you see people looking out of their window all the time. I do. If you're not looking out of a window, you're sitting in a shop looking at the street (Andy Warhol quoted in Gidal 1971: 86).

Rather than an essentialism with which such films (and Abstract Expressionism) have been previously identified (Clement Greenberg characterised the modernist project as stripping back to a medium's absolute of appearance) in the current technological situation of information overload such films are readable as performing a mechanics of denial so central to the trajectory of the main character of Peter Haneke's film, and set in motion in *Caché*'s opening.

Like Haneke's un-located victim, this first avant-garde, resurfacing in compacted form as *Caché*'s introduction, itself became a subjugated filmic practice in the 70s when sidelined firstly by Peter Wollen's two avant-gardes (Wollen 1982 [1975]), separating formalism from politics, and secondly through the emergence of a political feminist counter-cinema and the development of a feminist textual analysis used by critics to deconstruct mainstream cinema, developments facilitated by Wollen's then partner and film-making collaborator, Laura Mulvey. In textual analysis, for Maggie Humm, by "examining condensations, ruptures and excess stereotypes in the filmic text, critics aim to reveal a hidden sub-text which may structure a film's "identity"" (Humm 1997:5)

Wollen's first avant-garde comprises non-narrative and formalist (materialist) work residing in the multi-voices and collective emphasis of the artisanal "co-op movement" emerging out of the fine arts (painting, sculpture) and the

second embodied a more politicised narrative practice employing psycho-analytic and Marxist ideologies in its analysis, with a relation to literary criticism, theatre and the margins of commercial cinema. One focuses on vision, perceptual processes and the image and the other emphasises the text's and language's social implications. Wollen identifies Jean-Luc Godard's work as the contemporary exemplar of the avant-garde's political arm, in which he further situates his own collaborations with Mulvey.

Wollen identified the second narrative avant-garde as "work within the space opened up by the disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified" (Wollen 1982: 98) and criticises the first as extreme and utopian: "it is as if they felt that once the signifier was freed from bondage to the signified, it was certain to celebrate by doing away with the old master altogether in a fit of irresponsible ultra-leftism and utopianism. As we have seen, this was not so far wrong" (Wollen 1982: 99). It is Wollen's position on the first avant-garde, now questioned by Haneke's re-integration of the two forms into the one film, that the intellectual elite, the central characters of Haneke's film exemplify through their bland commentary, registering their dissociation from the found tape: "Its dumb, I don't know what to say? Whose idea of a joke could this be? We should eat before it is totally ruined."

Emptying the signifier in materialist film may have appeared utopian to Wollen and promoted to extend Abstract Expressionism's essentialist brief by Gidal but a film like *Caché*, structured around the mechanics of trauma, promotes the view that the first avant-garde can be counter-read through trauma as content denied, outlining processes of erasure, revealing how secrets are kept, testing to what extent an event without a witness remains expressible. Such a use of materialist film may also prove useful in outlining the performed erasures in our own history, for example to surface the ideologies imposed on those migrants solicited to take on the 50s "New Australian" identity.

Wollen's conceptual split empowered Mulvey and other feminists who developed a counter-cinema within this second politically explicit avant-garde. To promote feminist empowerment Mulvey stressed that "women cannot be satisfied with an aesthetic that restricts counter-cinema to work on form alone. Feminism is bound to its politics; its experimentation cannot exclude work on content". (Mulvey 1979: 9) Claire Johnston stressed that "feminist film criticism can only emerge out of an analysis of the existing cinema". (Kaplan 1977: 399) Textual analysis was developed as a written tool for critically unpacking dominant cinema's gaps and fissures, its patriarchal biases in written form. As Annette Kuhn explains: "such disjunctures are discernible within the text in the form of "symptoms" –cracks, ruptures and so on. These symptoms provide us with clues as to what, ideologically speaking, is going on" (Kuhn 1982: 86).

Just as the opening of *Caché* returns elements of a subjugated materialist film practice, Martin Arnold's recent found footage cinema re-couples the two avant-gardes, handing pre-eminence to Gidal's materialist practice while performing Kuhn's definition. Textual Analysis, the method employed to dismiss materialist film from feminist film theory, returns as the performed subject inside his films. Arnold unravels the dreams and fantasy of Hollywood melodrama back to a pre-reflective perceptual moment and consequently the domain of materialist film. In performing textual analysis visually rather than as a written text these films impact directly on the body's perceptual apparatus.

In *Alone: Life Wastes Andy Hardy* Arnold repeats obsessively sampled extracts and gestures from the *Andy Hardy* series of American black and white feature films (1937-58). Arnold's repetitions are sometimes as little as a couple of frames long, turning the actors into tic-riddled puppets with stuttering soundtracks reminiscent of the sampling strategies employed in scratch video, contemporary experimental music and sound design. Arnold himself notes the sampling of hip-hop and Christian Marclay's broken record strategies (MacDonald 1994: 10).

Through re-editing and repetition a father repeatedly slaps his son. The recoil is slowed down. A mother's goodbye look becomes a shaky panic attack. Andy hesitantly walks forward and backwards in and out the door. Judy Garland's graceful song is broken down with repetitions and loops, creating broken rhythms and phrases, moving from the lyrical into sound poetry's shudder, clatter and thud fragments. Arnold describes stuttering as a condition in which "a message that is in conflict with what is being said wants to be expressed" (MacDonald 1998: 362), echoing Kuhn's description of textual analysis:

In the symptom, the repressed declares itself. Hollywood cinema is, as I have already said, a cinema of exclusion, denial, and repression. I inscribed a symptom into it, which brings some of the aspects of repression onto the surface, or to say it in more modest words, which gives an idea of how, behind the intact world of being represented, another not-at-all intact world is lurking. Maybe this is my revenge on film history." (in MacDonald 1994: 11)

For Foucault, power is exercised in implicit and subtle ways: "Power is not only found in the manifest authority of censorship, but one that profoundly and subtly penetrates an entire societal network." (Foucault 1977: 205) For

Foucault “discipline works through a series of “quiet coercions”, working at the level of people’s bodies, shaping how they behave and how they see the world” (Danaher, Schirato and Webb 2000: 62). It is such pressures that Arnold’s (and Haneke’s) cinema identifies. Arnold’s technique is available to tease out such *quiet coercions* operating in Australian conditions, used, for example in constructing an ambivalent New Australian.

A cluster of sublimated issues form around the 1950s term ‘New Australian’, to do with migration, aboriginal and migrant assimilation, Terra Nullius, the White Australia Policy and general ongoing indigenous disenfranchisement – which a materialist cinema of negation, erasure and gaps can render visible through unearthing the cracks in the official story. The term New Australian was assimilation’s goal, serving the White Australia Policy that preceded Multiculturalism. The White Australia Policy arose out of the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 at the point of Australia’s federation. A racially based white Australia would exclude the Chinese and Japanese. Jon Stratton notes that “ the assumption was that a racially homogeneous population would be culturally homogeneous” (Stratton 1998: 12). Assimilation was part of Australia’s official Post-War population management, demanding migrants to embrace the existing national culture (Castles et al 1988). Multiculturalism marked a shift from limiting entry to Australia to managing the existent Australian population (Stratton 1998: 44) and a shift for “white” to signify not only British and North Europeans to include Europeans generally, Turks and Lebanese with a key “remaining” emphasis on Christianity (Stratton 1998: 46).

The official position constructing the New Australian identity is evident in the Government Published Current Affairs Bulletin from 1948, published by the Commonwealth Office of Education, enunciating degrading resistances of name calling and the difficulties in obtaining work for the newcomer:

If Australians refer to them as “Dagoes” (remember that European fruiterer who placed broad notice outside his shop: *Shop here before the day goes?*), “Reffos” or “Pommies”, try to crowd them out of jobs, blame them for all kinds of vague and mythical sins and generally give the newcomers the impression that they are pushing in where they are unwanted, the reports which go back to other would-be migrants are likely to dry up the stream of immigration at its source (CAB 1948: 3)

This publication cites a recent Gallop poll that indicates that 48% of Australians are against welcoming displaced persons from Europe whilst 30% are for such migration. The argument is made here for Australians “to rid themselves of prejudice against immigrants if they are to be encouraged here” (CAB 1948: 4). Such attitudes need to be turned around for the common good for Australia cannot expect a positive migrant attitude in such an environment: “We must not expect glowing patriotism from men and women whom we contemptuously call “Reffoes” and isolate as strangers” (CAB 1948: 4). The solution presented lies in a process of assimilation to create *New Australians*: “migrants need to take up Australian customs, a need to cut off an isolationism at the pass... to ensure that they become New Australians” (CAB, 1948: 6).

The New Australian is expected to let go of their past and embrace an Australian identity: “If the official policy – created by national need - is to be effective, the newcomers must be encouraged to become New Australians, not Old Italians, Old Yugoslavs or Old Englishmen in a new land” (CAB 1948: 4). Like the emptied content at the heart of Gidal’s materialist film the New Australian identity is defined more by what is taken out than what is put in. Though a positive counterpoint to Dago, Reffo and Pom (and later Wog) this identity retains an essential pejorative edge. Though assimilation expects a denial of old roots, the term New Australian retains a difference to “Australian”, setting the newcomer apart, marooned from their formative hard-wired identity. In its ahistorical denial of the past the numbing act of assimilation performs on the migrant’s body what Terra Nullius performed on the Australian landscape and on aboriginal culture. An exchange between the aboriginal Goggle Eye and Aeneas Gunn in the film *We of the Never Never* (1982) based on the book, (Gunn 1983 [1908]) on land ownership accesses this gap and is re-edited in one of the segments below. Interestingly, this exchange does not appear in the book itself. The act of assimilation imparted on aboriginal culture was also imparted on the migrant. A sense of how such assimilation operated on aboriginal culture in the 1930s is available in *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), directed by Phillip Noyce, when a Government official explains how blackness can be “bred out” of the half-cast aboriginal over three generations. (See my re-edit of this sequence below).

An Australian identity remains out of the new arrival’s reach, postponed, whilst a heroic Australian identity is also emerging out of the World War II that has itself not come to terms with an indigenous holocaust it has either perpetrated, witnessed, ignored, denied or erased (Reynolds 2001). This indigenous erasure remains an un-locatable event residing under the surface of a policy of heroic war remembrance, assimilation and the veneer of a White Australia Policy, a landscape of colonial coercion, denial and forgetting reminiscent of the layers peeled away through Haneke’s *Caché*.

To be a New Australian contains the danger of becoming marooned. In her discussion of what the stammer can reveal about the Australian migrant Sneja Gunew asks “What form of repression takes place when the subject is forced to enter a new symbolic order?” (Gunew 2003: 45) This is the New Australian’s dilemma, an emptied no-man’s land awaits. One’s first language runs the danger of becoming alien, transgressive, shameful, unacceptable (Gunew 2003: 45). This dilemma is present in my second and third re-edits of an Arthur Caldwell speech (see below).

This act of assimilation as it was imparted on the migrant had already been imposed on a diminishing indigenous population as the rationale behind the stolen generation. Such assimilation operates on the body of the migrant and abducted aboriginal child, what Terra Nullius performed on the Australian landscape by the first settlers. I try to deliver a sense of this tripartite relationship between Migrant, Aboriginal and Settler communities in the first sampled re-edit below. Although the migrant and native are both impacted by forms of ‘assimilation’, the migrant’s arrival ties him or her implicitly into the inequalities exacted on the originating peoples. As Joseph Pugliese and Suvendrini Perera have pointed out, “Migrant labor worked and continues to work on ground appropriated by the violence of the colonial process.” (Pugliese and Perera 1998: 5)

It is these ambiguous clusters of power and “quiet coercion” around the denied violence of colonialism and migration that the following sections of performed textual analysis try to crack, to undermine the ideologies presented. I offer five re-edits as examples. The first have used three images of an Asian migrant, an aboriginal using an axe and the actor Chips Rafferty to repeat the phrase “New Australian”, the second and third re-assemble a speech made in 1949 by the Minister for Immigration Arthur Caldwell to a group of English migrants, the fourth re-edits a section of *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and the fifth segment re-edits a section of *We of the Never Never*. I complete this paper with the following summaries of these five re-edits.

This first piece is very short but is repeated and modified several times, more like a musical riff than a sentence. Its three images place the Settler, Immigrant and Native communities in relation. The first image of a Japanese war bride appears on each occasion the word “new” is spoken. The second image is of an Aboriginal using an axe and stutters through the “nonsensical” phrasing “Austr, Austr, Austr”. This lost identity is the meat in the sandwich, whose voice is frustrated, lost and more concealed than the other two. The final image is of the actor Chips Rafferty (1909-71) whose depictions of Australian settlers made him Australia’s most popular actor. Rafferty repeats the phrase “alian/alien” in his own voice, ambiguously both announcing his own alien status and anointing the other two identities as such. Repeating this short piece suggests how racism or difference are declared through the small inoffensive repeating concussions of the everyday, like, for example for the migrant continuously being asked to spell your name.

Figure 1: Immigrant, Native, Settler re-edit (de Bruyn 2012)

The next two samplings have been gleaned from an Australian newsreel from 1949 in which the Minister for Migration, Arthur Calwell welcomes British migrants is representative of the official story screening in movie theatres of the period. The welcoming speech Caldwell delivers to the camera surrounded by a group of young newly arrived English migrant men includes the following: “You are very welcome as New Australians in our Australian community. We want to see more of your type coming to these shores to build up the homes that Australians want and you yourselves will want too, later on” (Calwell 1949).

I repeat and bring attention to those gaps in his address that point to the New Australian’s experience. Disjunctures appear in the text by repeating the phrases “your type”, “later on” and “New Australian and Australian” becoming the symptomatic ties and stutters of the White Australia Policy’s hidden ideology. These re-edits inscribe a symptom into Calwell’s speech as Arnold, echoing Humm and Kuhn, inscribes into Hollywood melodrama. With each repeat of such phrases we zoom in on those migrants listening to his speech, stressing their facial gestures and hand movements, indicating how Foucault’s unspoken “quiet coercions” are being unconsciously inscribed into the bodies of the migrant audience with Caldwell as stuttering puppeteer.

Figure 2: Arthur Calwell: New Australians re-edit (de Bruyn 2012)

Figure 3: Arthur Calwell: New Australians re-edit (de Bruyn 2012)

In the re-edit from *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), set in the 1930s, the Government's authority is performed by Kenneth Branagh's character, A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia. Demonstrating a process of assimilation he outlines via slide show how blackness will be bred out of the aboriginal population. It finishes:

Now as you can see in the third generation, or third cross no trace of native origin is apparent. The continuing infiltration of white blood finally stamps out the black colour, the aboriginal has simply been bred out... and in spite of himself the native must be helped out (2002).

As Neville completes his talk, a repeating tick has been edited into his smile and eye movement, to signify the unstable nature of the racist ideology he performs and to suggest that its ambiguities are embedded, under the surface, inside his body.

Figure 4: *Rabbit Proof Fence* re-edit (de Bruyn 2012)

Similarly in the final segment sampled from *We of the Never Never*, slight ticks have been incorporated into both the Aeneas Gunn character and the drovers sitting at the campfire. Gunn states to Goggle Eye “That’s right, the stars the moon, everything, God made everything” and the drover later remarks on the aboriginal Goggle Eye’s alternative view “There you go, they’re bloody heathens, you can’t teach them anything”. The ticks perform these expressed Christian ideologies as symptom, undermining the bodies of those performing them in preference to Goggle Eye’s view.

Figure 5: *We of the Never Never* re-edit (de Bruyn 2012)

These re-sampled historic film segments stand as my performed conclusion. They express the subjugated viewpoints of those Australians subjected to official government “assimilation” policies. These Australian government policies led

to the marooned, ambiguous and “emptied” identity of the “New Australian” for the 50s migrant and manufactured a “Stolen Generation” within the local indigenous population. Within theoretical discourse the re-sampling method used to construct these segments benefits from a “traumatic” re-reading of Gidal’s “materialist film”, discounted by Wollen’s *two avant-gardes* and a feminist counter-cinema in the 1970s as a-political and utopian. This practice returns through Benning, Arnold and others not in its originating essentialist form, but as a practice capable of expressing the emptied signifier as a ‘denial of content’ at the heart of traumatic experience. Its visible return within mainstream cinema finds a highpoint in Haneke’s *Caché*.

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