Wog Drama and 'White Multiculturalists': The Role of Non Anglo-Australian Film and Television Drama in Shaping a National Identity

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In the lively theoretical debate about exploitation of ethnic elements in the Australian film and television industry, there is a tendency towards ethno-centric analysis. Often, such debate fails to consider the role of Anglo-Australian filmmakers in encouraging a multicultural presence in commercial film and television drama.

Gassan Hage, in *White Nation: Fantasies of a White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society,* details appropriation of 'non-white' commodities by 'white multiculturalists' in an increasing number of mainstream Australian movies. Such appropriation, he argues, is used to preserve a 'white nation' ideology.[1] Hage suggests that:

> white multiculturalists [...] share in a concept of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around a White culture where Aboriginal people and non-White 'ethnics' are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a White national will.[2]

This definition suggests that 'white multiculturalist' film producers assume control of the national space by embracing cultural difference as a theme or character in their films. Characters such as Scott in *Strictly Ballroom* and Carl in *Death in Brunswick* are analysed as 'white Australian' protagonists who resolve their dramatic situation with assistance from Spanish-Australian and Greek-Australian partners. Hage sees such dramatic techniques as the ethnic girlfriend and, in one case, her flamenco dancing father or, in the other, her 'underworld connections', as demonstrating 'the capacity to appreciate and productively exploit diversity' in order to sustain the power of the hero's 'white Australian' world.[3]

This article questions Hage's argument that 'white multiculturalists' use ethnics merely as 'national objects' serving 'white national will',[4] and reasons that, on the contrary, 'white multiculturalists' contribute to the development of cultural diversity in film and television. While productions such as *The Heartbreak Kid* (1992) and *Heartbreak High* (1993) were produced by a white Anglo-Australian team (Gannon and Jenkins), they do present non Anglo-Australian characters and their bicultural conflicts. These 'white multiculturalists' use ethnics as national objects, but as such they contribute to the development of cultural diversity in Australian film and television. Gannon and Jenkins' presentations of non Anglo-Australian subjects and issues eased the way for filmmakers such as Greek-Australian director, Ana Kokkinos, to present second generation ethnic Australian stories to mainstream audiences.

The contribution of 'white multiculturalists' to second-generation, non Anglo-Australian representation in film and television is demonstrated in, for example,

the range of second-generation, non Anglo-Australian character roles played by of actor Alex Dimitriades. Dimitriades' portrayal of Nick Poulos in *The Heartbreak Kid* and then in *Heartbreak High* has bestowed mainstream acceptability on non-Anglo protagonists since the early 1990s. *The Heartbreak Kid* was the third most successful film at the Australian box office in 1993. Its success proved that multiculturalism could work in mainstream film and television, and it raised important ethical issues, although many argued that it failed to address them seriously.[5]

The Heartbreak Kid was Dimitriades' debut film appearance. His successful career switch from film heart-throb to prime-time commercial television had a significant impact on teenage attitudes to non-Anglo protagonists, and his popularity saw a new breed of adolescent take up the banner of 'wog' pride.[6] Dimitriades then played Warren Lanfranchi in the award-winning telemovie *Blue Murder*, and Detective Charlie Coustos in the series, *Wildside* (all produced by Ben Gannon and Michael Jenkins). Director Ana Kokkinos recognised Dimitriades' potential appeal to heterosexual and homosexual audiences, casting him as the gay character, Ari, in the film *Head On* (1998). As Kokkinos explained in an interview on the ABC's *Express* program, Dimitriades' existing star-status from his film and television work with Gannon and Jenkins encouraged a loyal male, female, Anglo and non-Anglo audience to the cinemas to see a film about a gay 'wog' boy.

Dimitriades was an ethnic commodity controlled by white Australian producers (Gannon and Jenkins). The producers' casting of Dimitriades in *The Heartbreak Kid* and *Heartbreak High* in the early 1990s coincided with a push by Actors' Equity and the Office of Multicultural Affairs to redress the under- and mis-representation of non Anglo-Australian character roles.[7] Gannon and Jenkins proposed the casting of second-generation non Anglo-Australians in key roles in both projects, and the story lines reflected racial diversity. Here, the 'white Australian' producers carefully negotiated government policy and a multicultural commodity to create an environment favourable to their products. However, Dimitriades' status as ethnic commodity soon became irrelevant when *Heartbreak High*'s poor ratings were blamed on the series being too multicultural for young audiences.[8] The producers killed off Dimitriades' character in a boxing match, and his family was relocated to Greece in favour of a new Anglo-Australian cast.

However, Jenkins and Gannon continued to capitalise on Dimitriades' ethnic appeal in the safer environment of non-commercial television over the next five years. In 1995, they cast him as the Italian-Australian criminal, Warren Lanfranchi, in the ABC telemovie, *Blue Murder.* Following a short stint in soap opera serials and on the stage, Dimitriades then played Detective Charlie Coustos in Gannon and Jenkins' ABC police drama, *Wildside.* Here, the white Australian producers exploited the ethnic element in order to create popular television but, rather than 'containing' the non Anglo-Australian as Hage's theories predict,[9] they created opportunities for the representation of second generation non-Anglo characters in Australian film and television drama.

Tony Mitchell, analysing the ABC television series *Embassy* (1990-1992) with reference to Edward Said's theories of Orientalism, discusses how 'occidental fears and desires are exoticized and eroticized into manageable parts' by the Anglo-Australian producers to create an 'imaginative geography'.[10] Annette Hamilton, in

her article, 'Fear and Desire: Aborigines, Asians and the National Imaginary', refers to an 'appropriation' of 'commodified images, which permits the Australian national imaginary to claim certain critical and valuable apects of the "Other"'. [11] The same argument may be levelled at constructions of non Anglo-Australian characters, such as Dimitriades' Nick Poulous in the television series, *Heartbreak High,* where cultural attributes are appropriated or negotiated in order to present the multicultural face of Australia. Hamilton describes the process as 'our search for certain forms of "Otherness" to incorporate into the national self'.[12]

While these sentiments echo Hage's 'white nation fantasy', they do not neutralise the positive aspect of 'white multiculturalist' producers willing to take a risk on non Anglo-Australian characters, themes and story lines. The films *Death in Brunswick, Strictly Ballroom, Moving Out* and *The Heartbreak Kid* indicate that 'white multicultural' film producers do appropriate or exploit ethnic commodities in order to present a national self or national space, but they also contribute to the development of cultural diversity and its representation on Australian screens in a cinematic and television world where ethnic characters and stories are still somewhat limited.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, in the absence of a substantial body of second generation non Anglo-Australian filmmakers in a position to redress these practices, these 'white multiculturalists' have provided an important platform. Hage forecasts a negative future for non-whites in taking control of the national space:

> Australian myth-makers and icons, old and new, are largely Anglo-white, from shearers and surfers to television and radio 'personalities', to movie actors and rock stars. What this creates for those positioned in this public space is a lasting impression that the field of pressure in Australia, even if it is open for non-Anglos to accumulate whiteness within it, remains above all an 'Anglo-looking' phenomenon.[13]

Andrew Jakubowicz reinforces the limitations of multiculturalism as a policy which has not yet effectively drawn significant numbers of ethnic film-makers into major film production.[14] Non Anglo-Australian filmmakers such as Pauline Chan and Monica Pellizzari are vocal about 'people in power such as TV and film producers' still 'playing it safe when choosing stories with or about non Anglo-Australians' to 'reinforce the same old stereotypes'.[15]

In their book *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late '80s,* Susan Dermody and Liz Jacka highlight the small proportion of films about cultural diversity produced at a time when multicultural policy was largely facilitated.[16] Jon Stratton argues that cultural diversity was not expressed in Australian film and television at a time when the Australian community was experiencing the impact of multicultural policy because of the perceived threat of non Anglo-Australian culture on Anglo-Australian society.[17] Like Hage, he believes that recent films expressing multiculturalism 'operate to a large extent as allegories of the Australian national ideology' which is still based on white Australia politics.[18] Thus, his analysis of *Strictly Ballroom* identifies the Anglo-Australian hero's attempt to introduce Spanish-style dancing techniques to the official ballroom competition as jeopardising the orthodox Anglo-Celtic culture:

> Myths from the assimilationist period are still circulating within the now dominant discourse of official multiculturalism. In this ideological reworking of the role of

ballroom dancing as a metaphor for Australian society, the attempt within the film to preserve the art in its traditional form suggests the attempt to preserve Australian culture as fundamentally Anglo-Celtic.[19]

Stratton believes that, while second-generation, non Anglo-Australian filmmakers are 'now in a position to make films about their circumstance', such work heightens the anxiety of the Anglo-Celtic community who 'like Howard and Hanson [...] champion the culture of the pre-European and Levatine, and Asian, migrations period'.[20] Stratton echoes comments by filmmakers such as Pellizzari and Chan about the perceived nervousness of film producers and funding bodies to support 'ethnic' films and filmmakers.[21]

Kokkinos, with her first feature film, *Head On*, is an example of a director who has successfully made the transition from independent 'ethnic' film to mainstream box office success. The film deals with a second-generation Greek-Australian protagonist confronting issues of gender and biculturalism, again starring Dimitriades in a lead role. The film was nominated for several AFI (Australian Film Industry) awards in 1998, and Dimitriades' performance was critically acclaimed.

Chris Berry emphasises that *Head On*'s success in placing 'questions about Australian cultural identity into cinema in a way that is not only critically but also commercially successful',[22] marked an important shift in the 'ethnic' film genre. The intertextuality of its gender, ethnic and familial themes resonated with audiences who did not share the same gay, ethnic or family experiences:

> Perhaps it is here, then, that *Head On* effects its most interesting shift. For in working across the usual line between an 'ethnic' 'minority' topic and the Anglo 'mainstream' it begins to redefine what Australian national cinema and Australian national culture are, inscribing the Greek-Australian identity as equally central to any other experience and not marginal or different.[23]

This claim contradicts Hage's theory that ethnic commodities are only used to further the 'white nation fantasy', and that even if it is 'open for non-Anglos to accumulate whiteness within it', an ethnic film will remain an 'Anglo-looking phenomenon'.[24] Chris Berry attributes *Head On*'s success in crossing the boundaries between 'us and them' to its presentation of the Greek-Australian experience as commensurate with the Anglo-Australian experience by establishing Greek-Australian culture as neither marginalised nor different.[25]

Hage argues that the popular language of white acceptance of ethnicity, for example, the citizenship ritual and colloquial references such as 'he's one of us now', reinforce the white Australian's power as a member of the dominant group protecting the white national space.[26] However, Ari's unrelenting interaction within the Anglo-Australian and Greek-Australian worlds in *Head On* confirms Chris Berry's argument that the film has a role in redefining ethnic cinema and shaping national identity. Ari's characterisation contests Hage's thoughts on the power of the dominant group protecting its territory.[27] As a second-generation, non Anglo-Australian character, Ari zigzags between his Greek cultural roots and the Australian gay and drug cultures. He negotiates his Greek and Australian worlds to lead the life he wants to lead. Berry summarises Ari as a 'compromised hero', and it is through this very process of negotiating various worlds that the film has power to access audiences not previously attracted to gay or ethnic cinema:

> From a generic point of view, this is precisely what makes the film exciting and interesting. This is not a film that feels its audience will only be able to cope with gay protagonists by showing them as a cosy Anglo domestic couple 'just like us' (*The Sum of Us*) or as entertaining but barely human drag queens at a safe distance out on Uluru (*Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert)* [...] Ari's conflicts are more than just those generated by the cultural differences between overseas-born parents and Australian-born children. With the emphasis on unemployment and lack of prospects, they resonate more broadly across a whole generation and more of younger Australians.[28]

In an interview with Andrew L Urban, Kokkinos explains that 'what you see is Ari struggling, and acknowledging his pain. I wouldn't describe it as self-pity. It's pain and the acknowledgement of that'.[29] It is this emotional journey which Berry believes inscribes the Greek-Australian experience as 'equally central to any other experience and not marginal or different'.[30] Seen from this perspective, *Head On* refutes Hage's claim that 'white multiculturalism works to mystify, and to keep out of public discourse, other multicultural realities in which white people are not the overwhelming occupiers of the centre of national space'.[31]

When Ari is asked by a stranger in a Greek nightclub if he is proud to be Greek, he answers, 'I had nothing to do with it'. After withstanding humiliation at the hands of a homophobic, second-generation, Greek-Australian policeman, Toula, Ari's transvestite Greek-Australian friend, urges Ari to 'stand up against the shit and the hypocrisy, it's the only way to make a difference'. Toula departs, proclaiming that she can 'look after herself'. While the film sources and develops the same 'ethnic' commodities as films such as *Death in Brunswick, Strictly Ballroom* and *The Heartbreak Kid* that precede it, it redirects these 'ethnic' commodities towards equal interaction.

This negotiation with both the white and non-white world in *Head On* stands in direct contradiction to Hage's 'white nation fantasy', which denies the ability of non-whites, such as director Ana Kokkinos, to accumulate the whiteness required to demystify the 'white national image'.[32] Kokkinos was able to break through these barriers to commercial ethnic film success largely through the exploitation of ethnic commodities, such as the media popularity of Alex Dimitriades generated by his previous film and television work controlled by white multiculturalist producers in the 1990s. While Hage correctly uncovers the exploitation of 'non-white commodities' by 'white multiculturalist' producers in films such as *Death in Brunswick* and *Strictly Ballroom*, he doesn't consider the role these 'white cosmopolites' play in encouraging multicultural faces and themes in commercial film and television drama. It is the interaction of these various elements that works towards representing multi-dimensional second generation non Anglo-Australian film and television drama, and indicates a positive future for the non Anglo-Australian protagonist in mainstream Australian cinema. The feature film *Head On* shows the 'ethnic' element can not only feel at home in Hage's world of the 'white multiculturalist' but, rather than maintaining this position for the function of the 'white cosmo-multiculturalist' as Hage predicts,[33] the second generation non Anglo-Australian hero is finding his/her own place in shaping a national identity in the national cinema.

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24 Hage, op. cit., p 191.
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26 ibid., pp 103-104.
27 Berry, op. cit., p 37.
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30 Berry, op. cit., p 137.
31 Hage, op. cit., p 19.
32 Hage, op. cit., p 191.
33 ibid, p 202.