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# *Landscapes of Whiteness: Aboriginality in Chauvel's Early Cinema*

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on two of Chauvel's early films to show how representations of Aboriginality and landscape often subtly, though sometimes violently, prioritise white sovereignty. Ultimately, whiteness (a way of seeing and being in the world) can be read as a lens Chauvel uses to both shape his representations of Aboriginality and landscape and simultaneously justify white sovereignty in Australia. When films such as Chauvel's are viewed with this relationship in mind, the fictionalised manipulation of landscape and Aboriginality, which is characteristic of whiteness in Australian cinema, is undermined as a legitimising discourse of white sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Aboriginlity; Chauvel; cinema; landscape

## Introduction

Charles Chauvel is remembered today as the director of the groundbreaking Australian film, *Jedda* (1955). *Jedda* is often seen as a landmark film in the context of Australian cinema because it is the first film to focus on Aboriginal characters in the outback; however, for Chauvel, *Jedda* was a return to themes he had explored in his earliest films. In one of his early films –*The Moth of Moonbi* (1925) – Chauvel used Aboriginality as a plot device in a story about landscape: a clowning Aboriginal character assists the hero while the purity of country life is contrasted with the immorality of life in the city. In a later film – *Uncivilised* (1936) – Chauvel used landscape as a plot device in a story about race: in the Queensland tropics a white "native king" governs a tribe of Aboriginal people. Arguably, landscape, Aboriginality and whiteness are key elements that authors and filmmakers manipulate to present arguments about sovereignty.

Whiteness is more than a characteristic of identity; it is a way of thinking about race and a way of being in place. Firstly, whiteness is a discourse. It refers to ideas about race and those ideas have actual, material consequences. White ideas about race – sometimes conscious, sometimes not – are acted upon to secure material white privilege. However, white privilege is more than the material outcome of racist ideologies. Whiteness can also refer to how white people act and think, as well as how they relate to non-white

"Others" and the environment. In *Revealing Whiteness* (2006), Shannon Sullivan argues that assumptions about landscape are central to whiteness:

> to be a white person means that one tends to assume that all cultural and social spaces are potentially available for one to inhabit. The habit of ontological expansiveness enables white people to maximise the extent of the world in which they transact. (25)

While it is possible to argue that white people practice and benefit from ontological expansiveness in their everyday lives – that is, that all spaces are available to white people – this ontological habit has a cultural manifestation. Perhaps, even, this ontological habit requires a fantasy first: the notion that the land is available, accessible, or even owed by whiteness. In settler-colonial societies such ontological expansiveness requires the fictional, habitual de-legitimisation of indigenous sovereignty. Only then is the landscape available for occupation.

The ideas that underpin ontological expansion have a long cultural heritage. Kay Anderson, in *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (2007), provides an analysis of how Aboriginal people were classified by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific and legal theory and philosophy in ways that imagined the landscape as free for white occupation. Kay Anderson's research showed that, during this period, the definition of what it meant to be human was a central concern across many fields of thought:

> human "being" was theorised and ranked according to *specific measures* of civilisation. These measures, not least ones of cultivating the earth, drew their logic from the humanist thesis of human distinction from the rest of the world's life forms […] The nineteenth-century doctrine of "race" thus drew upon the thesis of human distinction on earth for its essentialist and hierarchising logic. (194)

Within such a worldview, indigenous people were categorised as people lacking the pre-conditions for humanity and civilisation. They were defined as "subpersons", "Others", "barbarians" and "ab-original". Such a discourse overlooked the significant spiritual, cultural and agricultural practices of indigenous people, instead imagining indigenous people to be uncivilised and savage, without agency and, therefore, without sovereignty. This was a fiction that built on the desire for ontological expansion.

Sullivan refers to a cycle whereby ontological privilege is tethered to the white control of representations of Otherness. For Sullivan, this ongoing cycle is based on the notion of an "appropriate" relationship to the world. In such an ontological relationship, "non-white peoples and cultures" are commoditised and transformed into "objects for white appropriation and use" (122). The Other and the landscape both become resources for the creation of white privilege (or, at least, the fantasy that white privilege is justifiable). Sullivan argues that the "appropriate" relationship to the environment is a self-fulfilling prophesy: "Failure to embody this proper relationship with the world marks one as a subperson, as a quasi-thing that is then legitimately available for, even in need of,

appropriation by full persons" (122). The "use" of Aboriginality by white directors, writers and performers (full persons), as well as their representations of Aboriginal people as subpersons (who are not commercially utilising the land), are simultaneously an enactment of ontological privilege (using Others) and a justification for the appropriation and misrepresentation of Aboriginality. That is, as Sullivan states, the benefits to whiteness of an "appropriate" relationship to place include "not merely economic gain, but also increased ontological security" (122); further, increased ontological security leads to an ongoing investment in, and enactment of, a discourse of white sovereignty.

Charles Chauvel's commitment to the Australian landscape was ingrained in him from an early age. Born in October 1897 to a wealthy family, Chauvel's family made a living on the land. Even though he would become, in Stuart Cunningham's words, "the architect of the most avowedly nationalist filmmaking in Australia" (19), Chauvel's decision to become a filmmaker – shortly after his brother had joined the clergy – left his father

> dismayed that his two eldest sons should leave the land. This seemed nothing short of sacrilege to him; that they would turn their backs on the soil notwithstanding that [Charles …] did everything in his power to write of it, film it, and sing its praises for the rest of his life. (Elsa Chauvel *My Life* 13)

Elsa Chauvel's defence of her husband suggests that the fiction of the land that Chauvel created was born of the same drive his father had to work the land and make it pay. While his father drove cattle across his land, Chauvel contributed to the fictions that justified his father's sovereignty. While his early films appear to be stock Hollywood adaptations, reading them with the triumvirate of whiteness, Aboriginality and landscape in mind, reveals the serious repercussions of such fiction.

Chauvel's first film – *The Moth of Moonbi* (1925) – was an Australian version of the Western-style films he had worked on (and appeared in) in Hollywood. *The Moth of Moonbi* is an adaptation of Mabel Forrest's novella, *The Wild Moth* (1924). The narrative involves a country girl who is attracted to the lights of the big city. She goes to the city and is embarrassingly swindled by a man there. She returns home, where an ex-suitor rescues her from her father's colleague. There is no complete version of Chauvel's adaptation, although the thirty minutes of footage remaining at the National Screen and Sound Archives reveal the kidnapping of a heroine by her father's colleague, a cameo performance by Chauvel adorning black make-up to play an Aboriginal stockman, a similarly black-faced female Aboriginal character who acts like a drunken, blundering fool, and the Aboriginal stockman's assistance during the rescue of the heroine. Further, there are overly long passages of cattle-droving and landscapes that point to the fact that creating a nostalgic connection to the country was Chauvel's passion from the outset. Representing Aboriginality using comic, grotesque, beggarly stereotypes of the day erases any disturbing questions about the humanity of Aboriginal people and their sovereign possession of the land. Chauvel's erroneous representation of

Aboriginality makes his patriotic attachment to the land possible. This self-fulfilling logic can also be discerned in a later film, *Uncivilised*.

*Uncivilised* is the story of Beatrice Lynn, a white female journalist captured in the wilderness by a white man, Mara. Mara had become the opera-singing chief of an Aboriginal tribe after he was lost in the bush as a boy. The story revolves around Mara and Lynn's ambivalent romance, which occurs against the backdrop of an international (Shanghai–Australian) drug-trafficking cartel led by the villainous Afghan, Akbar Jan. At the conclusion of the film, Akbar Jan is revealed to be the disguise of a presumed-murdered British superstar sleuth, Peter Radcliffe. In the narrative, Akbar Jan is an actual drug-runner. Unbeknownst to the other characters in the film, he was killed by Radcliffe before Radcliffe began impersonating him. Radcliffe had created his Arabic persona with make-up, a turban and a fake beard in order to expose the Shanghai bosses of the drug cartel. Once all of this is revealed, Lynn – despite having the option of leaving – decides to stay with Mara for good.

The setting of *Uncivilised* in the tropics of North Queensland taps into discourses about civilisation, colonial identity and the idea of "white Australia". According to Warwick Anderson (2002) "the tropical frontier" in science and popular literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a "scene of race struggle, and therefore a crucible for the production of a virile and robust white national identity" (76). However, in scientific and cultural discourses of the time white identity was not always seen as naturally suited to Australia. The tropics, for example, were where white bodies were most threatened. Warwick Anderson states that in the 1920s "many Australians still believed that a tropical climate would inevitably 'impoverish' the blood of any whites who endured it" (122). The fear was that the tropical environment would create physical and mental deterioration. In light of Warwick Anderson's work, Mara – positioned as he is within the crucible of white national identity – can be read as Chauvel's test case for the survival of whiteness in Australia. Unsurprisingly for a nationalist like Chauvel, Mara passes the test. Mara is a white Aboriginal chief; while characters in the film question his civility, it is ultimately endorsed through Lynn's acceptance of him. There is little to suggest why Mara should be the Aboriginal tribe's chief, except for his whiteness. Through the character of Mara, Chauvel essentialises whiteness as an innate property that Mara still has, or can at least recover, despite his being raised outside of "civilisation". This is in line with Warwick Anderson's reading of the anxiety provoked by physical and mental illness in the tropics. Of neurasthenia (a mental illness supposedly brought on by tropical heat), for example, Warwick Anderson states: "More often, a diagnosis of neurasthenia signalled the beginning of a salvage operation of white identity, not its subversion; it offered a chance of recuperation and redemption, not condemnation" (124).

The setting of *Uncivilised* in the tropics provides the perfect setting for Chauvel's salvage operation of whiteness. At one point Akbar Jan tells Mara "Do not forget […] that you are white", and Mara responds: "Sometimes I do forget". Mara's story is one of remembering whiteness. More broadly, though, *Uncivilised* is a story about remembering ontological privilege.

In *Uncivilised*, whiteness is an amalgam of different pop-culture genres and Chauvel's own interest in race and landscape. Stuart Cunningham states that the film fits within a 1930s genre of adventure stories established by American films such as the *Tarzan* films, as well as British boys'-own adventure novels (110). Further, Chauvel added his landscape themes (with extended shots of the tropics of North Queensland). Chauvel's narrative attempts to use the generic conventions at his disposal to resolve racial tensions of the day (the film includes the massacre of stockman by an Aboriginal warrior, and the fear that Asian drug trading would corrupt the purity of Western civilisation). Radcliffe, by killing Akbar Jan and inhabiting Jan's identity in order to capture the drug suppliers, resolves the "yellow peril" anxieties. In doing so he serves his role, as Cunningham has described it, as

> a stock type in British popular culture. The figure of the hero of Empire who disguises himself as a "native" in order to establish the rule of law in far-flung lands was frequent from the nineteenth century onwards. (115)

Radcliffe disguises himself as an Arab, while Mara inhabits Aboriginality in order to quash fears that whiteness might not naturally govern the tropics. The disguises and racial transformations of these stock popular-culture characters are outward manifestations of Chauvel's central assumptions that Otherness is available to be occupied and that whiteness should justifiably govern the Other. Each assumption supports the nationalist belief in white ownership and control of the land.

Mara's whiteness is the essential trait that sees him positioned at the top of a social order (Aboriginal culture) that exists outside of "civilisation". The fact that whiteness rules outside of civilisation shows that its dominance is completely naturalised. White governance, in *Uncivilised*, is seen to be a natural fact: doxa, normal, essential and real. The character of Radcliffe (the British sleuth who had disguised himself as Akbar Jan) reveals another essential trait of whiteness: its ability to use, then assume and manipulate the identity of the Other. Radcliffe is free to move in and out of racial identity. Arguably, Radcliffe is free to change "race" because he is a full person while the real Akbar Jan (killed and inhabited by Radcliffe) was a subperson. No one but white people "pass" in *Uncivilised*. Thus, while Radcliffe need only contain his whiteness in order to affect a change from white to Afghan, Others cannot gain whiteness in order to pass as white. This is a paradox in the film, as whiteness is imagined to be impervious to any "person" wishing to attain white privilege, while the boundaries of Otherness are constantly penetrated by white people. Whiteness (a synonym for "full person") can "pass", but Otherness (a synonym for "subperson") cannot. Arguably, then, both Mara's and Radcliffe's racial changes are fantasies of a white right to delimit Otherness as well as enactments of a desire for whiteness' absolute ontological mobility.

*Uncivilised*, set at the frontier of whiteness with characters that cross racial boundaries, can be read as Chauvel's commentary on "extreme whiteness". Richard Dyer (1997) has argued that "extreme whiteness" coexists with "ordinary" (less visible) whiteness, and

that both are important elements in the discourse of whiteness (222). Ordinary whiteness is normative and invisible (to whites and in representations by whites), whereas extreme whiteness is "exceptional, excessive, marked. It is what whiteness aspires to and also […] fears" (Dyer 222). Possibly, extreme whiteness arises when whiteness is in crisis. Whiteness becomes visible in the tropics to aid in the salvage operation of a white identity that controls the landscape and those within it. Further, the extreme whiteness of the tropics has an effect in the suburban cinemas it reaches by providing a model to which ordinary Australians can aspire in order to save the nation. Such 'extreme' aspirations fit within the cycle of 'appropriate' relations to place. Extreme whiteness in *Uncivilised* works to essentialise whiteness, as well as its governing and ontological privileges, in order to assuage racial, social and cultural fears about Otherness. The overall effect is to position whiteness at the helm of the nation space, ordering the population (if only by inhabiting the identity of others), and assuming complete sovereignty over the landscape and its people.

In *The Moth of Moonbi* and *Uncivilised* (and, though it is not the subject of this article, *Jedda*) Chauvel's prioritisation of white privilege (the assumed right to govern and to absolute ontological freedom) comes at the expense of Aboriginal agency. Chauvel presents arguments in support of white sovereignty by assuming artistic control over the humanity and identity of Aboriginal people. Chauvel's desire to control the landscape means that he is forced to create a fantasy of Otherness. Aboriginal historian Tony Birch (2003) has written eloquently of the effect of such imaginings on Australian history:

> Control of the landscape is vital to the settler psyche. The victors' histories falsely parade as the history of Australia. These histories are those of absence: of *terra nullius*. In order to uphold the lie of an "empty land", Europeans have either denied the Indigenous people's presence, or have completely devalued our cultures. These hegemonic histories take possession of others' histories and silence them, or manipulate and "deform" them. (152)

The focus of this article has been on the manipulation of Aboriginality to create a discourse that justifies white control of the land. The dominant story of the nation deforms, ignores, manipulates, silences or denies the significance of Aboriginal culture and the (personal and possessive) sovereignty of Aboriginal people. Studies of Australian culture need to view whiteness, Aboriginality and landscape as an imagined triumvirate that authors and directors manipulate to present an argument about sovereignty. While Chauvel's stance in relation to race and sovereignty can be articulated with the benefit of hindsight, modern arguments can be much more difficult to recognize. For example, scholars might reflect on their assumptions about the relationship between Aboriginality, whiteness and landscape in their thinking. Critical whiteness studies support such questions, impelling academics and students to consider how their critical practice contributes to white sovereignty. It would be hoped, however, that critical whiteness studies does not enact a critical recuperation of whiteness (a la Mara in *Uncivilised*), but that it leads to a greater understanding of the intricate

relationship between race and place. To this end, Shannon Sullivan asks, "In the case of race, as in all other cases, it is important to ask: for what does a particular habit empower a person and from what does it limit her?" (25).

**Conclusion**

This article has focused on the way a fiction of ontological expansiveness in Chauvel's cinema supports the fiction and practice of white sovereignty. But how does this fantasy limit white culture? Ultimately, given that white sovereignty is built on a fiction of Aboriginality, I would like to suggest that white sovereignty prevents any real cross-cultural communication or understanding of the real world. Instead, whiteness becomes trapped in its own imagining, destined to replay its own narratives. If white people cannot exist outside whiteness, than it is up to white people to transform whiteness. Relinquishing white sovereignty (however that might be achieved) can provide an opportunity to remake whiteness in ways that contribute to the privilege of others and that create the conditions for genuine, engaged, cross-cultural understanding. Sullivan suggests that habits are overcome through environmental transformation. Perhaps, then, it is time to rethink our conceptions of critical and actual landscapes in order to transform habits of white sovereignty.

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