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THE INFLUENCE OF FILM IN AN ISOLATED TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

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The influence that television exerts on audiences, especially children, is a matter for much debate. Films have been given less consideration as a matter for concern, no doubt because they are less ubiquitous and less accessible than television. However, in an isolated traditionally oriented Aboriginal community, films, in both the large screen and the newer video format, provide the single major source of entertainment and information on the larger European society. It is possible, in the absence of other forms of sustained contact with European society, that its influence can provide children with inappropriate and culturally dysfunctional models for behaviour.

From observations at a particular isolated community, films appear to influence people's ideas about the outside world and their attitudes and behaviours in certain situations. This influence is particularly noticeable in the attitudes, language and behaviours evidenced by children. It is often possible to tell what film has lately been shown in camp simply by observing the children at play. The greater the impact a film has made in terms of 'action' and excitement, the greater the length of time will aspects of that film be incorporated into play situations. Children are excellent imitators and it is common for specific phrases from films to be used in children's games long after the film has been shown.

The imitation of language, situations and attitudes portrayed in films is, however, not confined to play situations. For example, in the isolated community with which I am most familiar, a month ago two young men 'bailed up' a visiting European contractor and stole his motor vehicle. The circumstances of the theft, bag over the head to disguise identity, flashlight directed into the eyes to dazzle - as well as the language and attitude of the two men, paralleled an episode witnessed in a film three nights previously. The relation between film and incident was so well recognised at camp that the incident itself became a popular play-scene for children: "Give me the keys or I'll blow your head off."

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Shimpo (1978), in his study, *The Social Process of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory*, maintains that the impact of films upon Aboriginal communities is considerable. Not only do films have a direct effect upon schooling, through late nights and subsequent effects on attendance and attention, they also affect the social life of isolated communities. As he points out, sitting around campfires at night in extended family groupings plays an important part in the transmission of the culture. It is his contention that through the introduction of films this tradition has, in many places, been seriously interrupted:

As soon as it becomes dark, from small children to old people, everyone goes to watch the movie of the night.
(Shimpo, p.32)

He also maintains, with some justice, that Aborigines are exposed only to very selected aspects of Western society presented in a highly coloured and exaggerated way. The categories of movies popular at isolated communities, war, Kung Fu, cowboys, are limited. They are exactly those categories which would give the most highly coloured interpretation of the outside world. This may not be particularly important in communities where other sources of information are available and there is greater access to the outside world. In the isolated community, however, few people buy or receive newspapers, there is poor radio reception and, until very recently, no television. Trips outside to Darwin or any large town tend to be infrequent and of limited duration. Thus, films are important in that they are often the only window on the outside world for a majority of Aboriginal people in isolated communities.

Like children of many other ethnic backgrounds Aboriginal children, particularly boys, identify strongly with particular film characters, for example Charles Bronson and Bruce Lee. The popularity of these actors appears to be based on personality factors and physical abilities inherent in the type of character they normally portray. These abilities can be divided into four categories :

1. Physical ability and prowess in fighting, handling of motor vehicles, and skill with weapons.
2. Ability to command obedience/respect of other characters in the film.
3. The ability to initiate, control and sustain violent, action-packed scenarios.
4. Ability to project an aloof, calm, yet threatening demeanour, particularly the ability to remain expressionless in the face of provocation.

The abilities listed are possibly attractive to boys of a certain age in many cultures; however, in the isolated Aboriginal community identification with both actors and characters is at a very personal level. Boys watching a film will commonly claim ownership of a character in such a way as to obtain exclusive rights to that character's actions for the duration of a film. These rights also include a claim to imitate and portray that character's actions in any play situation. Ownership of a character can be established in three different ways, either by 'claiming', 'allocation' or 'acclamation'.

'Claiming' is the most frequently used method of establishing ownership. The claim to a particular character is established by shouting at the audience of children (adults, if present, are not included), "me there!" or "me there longfella one", while pointing at the character, and then arguing with, or coming to terms with, any counter-claim that may be made. The choicest roles, in terms of preferred personality traits and abilities, are usually claimed by those boys whose families are most dominant in the social hierarchy of the community at which these observations were made. Counter claims to a character tend to be infrequent because the two or three socially dominant boys usually have, or are allowed, first claim. If a valid counter claim *is* made, however, competition for the right to the character is pre-empted by a co-operative proposal being made. For example, "me there - you that other fellah, black hat, friend la me". In this way the choicest roles are often divided up amongst the two or three socially dominant boys.

This co-operative sharing out of eligible roles is often done in conjunction with the second method of establishing ownership - ownership by allocation. Again, there is a relationship between the social dominance of a particular boy and the extent to which he will, or will be allowed to, allocate roles. 'Allocation' of roles helps solve the problem of competition from counter-claims but is also often used as a means of ridicule, to tease younger children or children of lower status. When the aim of the role allocation is to tease, a dominant boy will choose a weak, silly or comic character and allocate it to a particular child, "that one there, silly one, 'im Murring", or, "John, John there". Younger boys will often argue or sometimes appeal to me, "not me sir, heh?" Girls will normally just hang their heads or cry unless a relation, usually a boy, takes their side. The importance that is attached to the ownership of characters in films, however arrived at, is shown by the fact that the allocation of characters for teasing purposes often results in fights erupting between allocator and allocatee.

The third way of establishing ownership of a character is 'acclamation'. This method is normally used only by younger boys and those who have a relatively low status. Ownership by acclamation relies very much on the group legitimising the relationship between individual and film character. For example, in one film the centre of attention was a short man, an anti-hero who would make a muddle of the correct actions but, through luck or good fortune, always won in the end. Whenever he appeared on the screen he was greeted with cries from both boys and girls of "Emmanuel! Emmanuel!". I assumed there was a connection between the character's muddled behaviour and some aspect of Emmanuel's behaviour. However, when I asked why everyone had called him "Emmanuel", I was told Emmanuel had claimed him.

In this episode, and other similar ones, there appeared to be two different explanations for the use of the acclamation method of establishing ownership. The first possibility is that Emmanuel, who did not enjoy a particularly high status, had not 'publicly' claimed the character but had done so only to those boys sitting around him. Thus, by the time the claim was known to everyone, counter-claims had been headed off by the weight of group opinion. The group had, in fact, legitimised and established the claim. The second supposition is less subtle. It may have been the case that Emmanuel made the claim prematurely, before the true nature of the hero's personality and actions became known. In this case the group's acclamation of him whenever his 'alter-ego' appeared on the screen may have contained a large element of teasing. Certainly, in all the cases where roles were assigned by group acclamation such roles were usually of little interest to the more dominant boys.

The ownership of characters, then, reflects the strong element of personal attachment the Aboriginal children in isolated communities develop for a particular character type. Often the action of the film character becomes a reflection of, or casts reflection on, the way the owning individual would like to see his actions perceived. This interaction can be seen in the use of the term 'starring'.

Related closely to the ownership of characters is the concept of 'starring'. This term is used frequently by children during the 'action' parts of films. When a character is involved in physical activities of an exciting nature in which he is the centre of attention, for example, fighting, fast driving, the audience (boys only) will start shouting out "starring! starring!". The term, however, is not used indiscriminately and the action must conform to a certain pattern. For example, the action must flow at a consistent pace and continue for a reasonable length of time. The suspense or excitement in the scene or scenes must also build to some sort of climax in which the hero undertakes a specific feat. Slow motion jump scenes

in Kung Fu movies, in which the focus of attention is normally on the heroic individual, are nearly always accompanied by shouts of "starring". It is also necessary for the scene to focus on one 'heroic' character withstanding the odds. Scenes in which characters of equal stature co-operatively undertake exciting or dangerous feats (as, for example, in *The Three Musketeers*) are rarely referred to as 'starring'. Likewise, scenes which contain all the other necessary criteria but lack the central focus of one character (for example, the football match in *M.A.S.H.*) are rarely referred to as 'starring'.

The term 'starring' is utilised in two ways: it can simply refer to the character and reflect the degree of adulation or encouragement which his actions elicit or it can relate to the ownership of a character. When a character who has been claimed by a boy is involved in action which meets the necessary criteria then that boy will normally be the one to shout out "starring! starring!". This is always addressed to the audience or to a friend, or group of friends. The owning individual is making a comment on, and drawing attention to, his character. Also implied in the use of the term, most often evidenced by gesture and action, is that there is a continuity between the screen character's actions and the owning individual's actions. Thus, it is both a way of saying, "Wow! look at that everyone!" and of implying, "That's exactly what I would do in the same situation - that's me!".

The term 'starring' has also been carried over into play situations. When boys are engaged in sports activities and the activity meets the correct criteria: group focus on one individual, and fast-paced action building to climax, then the boy holding central attention will often call out "starring!". Attention is thus being drawn to his activities as an extension of the 'heroic' activities witnessed in films.

These two concepts of owning a right to replicate a particular character's actions and the identification that the term 'starring' assumes, is part of the method by which culturally dysfunctional mores appear to be transferred from the screen to behaviour.

The preferences that people in traditionally oriented isolated Aboriginal settlements display for certain kinds of films ensures that highly exaggerated and violent aspects of Western European society are often emphasised. Shimpo notes that Aboriginals show distinct preferences for certain kinds of films. For example, they prefer outdoor settings to indoor scenes, they prefer action to

dialogue and they like anything at which they can laugh. These preferences are understandable in view of the lack of facility with the English language of many Aborigines in isolated settlements. The preference for action rather than dialogue is also in keeping with the emphasis that Aborigines place on behaviour as opposed to verbalisation in their own culture (Harris, 1977). This is combined with a limited ability to understand unfamiliar or sophisticated film techniques, such as the use of flashbacks or the rapid juxtaposition of dissimilar scenes.

In view of the scarcity of other formal avenues of communication, films can be the source of misinformation. For children at one isolated settlement "Greece" is the name of a film starring John Travolta, and "German" is a synonym for 'evil soldier'. Thus, in any war film, the bad guys, irrespective of the war concerned, are considered to be the Germans.

The most important and influential type of misinformation, however, is the inappropriate behaviour portrayed in certain film situations. The popularity of such actors as Charles Bronson and Bruce Lee has already been mentioned. The degree to which they engage in conflict with other characters and the kind of attitudes and behaviours they evidence at the time are carefully imitated by Aboriginal boys in conflict situations. The facial expressions - steady gaze and clenched jaw, and bodily positions - physical immobility and leg-widened stance, that they have so often observed in film characters are imitated in every detail. In fact, staring at a person with a steady gaze and clenched jaw, fists by the side, and legs apart for balance, is so much accepted as a sign of aggression that the adoption of this stance is enough to trigger a fight.

Aboriginal people in isolated settlements see only limited categories of film, some of which are seen repeatedly over periods of time with no apparent slackening of interest. In view of this, the imitation of actions, language and attitudes observed in films may be influential in shaping long term behaviour. Harris's findings would seem at least to suggest this possibility. He notes that "virtually all social skills are learned through imitation and observation" (1977, p.19). Thus, the tendency of the children to model themselves on and claim ownership of characters could be very influential in the learning of certain types of behaviour.

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