



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

'ACTION AND NO ACTION'
ABORIGINAL CHILDREN'S CLASSIFICATION OF FILMS
IN AN ISOLATED COMMUNITY

*D.H. Thompson

Films are a significant social event in many isolated Aboriginal communities. It has been argued, however, that they are a disruptive influence on the transmission of traditional culture (Shimpo, 1978) and provide inappropriate models for behaviour (Thompson, 1983).

This paper examines a small group of Aboriginal children's perception and understanding of films in an isolated, traditionally oriented Aboriginal community. It focuses on the way in which a small group of Aboriginal informants classify films and attempts to examine the basis for some of the classifications. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the extent to which the use of particular types of film classification can give an insight into the isolated community audiences' knowledge and understanding of the social realities in the wider world outside the isolated community.

THE ACTION FILM

All films shown in the isolated community are classified into one of two major categories, these are either 'Action' films or 'No Action' films. Through observation, questioning and the comparison of films classified, it became apparent that 'action' films were defined according to the following unacknowledged but nevertheless observable set of criteria. Thus, to be classified as 'action', a film had to:

1. Feature a character with whom the audience could identify, specifically one who displayed certain personality factors and physical abilities. For example, prowess in fighting combined with a high degree of physical ability, the ability to command the obedience and respect of other characters in the film, and to initiate and control action-packed scenarios. It was also important that he project an aloof, calm, yet threatening demeanour and have the ability to remain expressionless in the face of provocation. Finally, at the end of the film he had to win, preferably over almost insurmountable odds.

* Kormilda College, Winnellie, N.T.

2. The film had to move along at a fast pace with short scenes and fast changes of location.
3. The film had to maintain a reasonably high degree of tension.
4. Dialogue had to be simple and kept to a minimum and information essential to an understanding of the plot had preferably to be conveyed visually.
5. There could be no unexpected character surprises, both villains and heroes had to be instantly recognisable.
6. There had to be lots of physical action carried out by recognisable individuals preferably involving fight scenes, gun fights or chase scenes of some sort as in, for example, *Smokey and the Bandit*.
7. The plot had to be relatively simple and easy to follow.

Despite this relatively clear definition of what constitutes an action film, in practice the actual use of the term is not so clear cut because it has both a classificatory and a normative use. Thus, the term 'action' is used, not only to classify a film as a certain type, but also to indicate one's feelings about the film. For example:

Self : Film about 'im bridge, is 'e action or no action?

Inf. 1 : 'Im action sir.

Inf. 2 : Yes, 'im action.

Whereas :

Self : Black Belt Jones, did you enjoy 'im last night?
(Laughter and indication of karate chops and kicks)

Inf. 1 : Yessir, 'im action! Action!

Inf. 2 : 'Im good one.

Inf. 3 : Too much sir!

Thus, the term 'action' can mean, "it was a good or interesting film, I enjoyed it", or, "it was full of action, plenty of fighting and shooting".

The difference between the classification of these two films is that Example 1, *A Bridge Too Far Away*, is an action film in the sense that it has certain essential elements that place it in that category. In Example 2, the film is not only an action film in the sense of fulfilling the necessary criteria but it is also action in the sense that my informants really enjoyed and understood it.

This distinction between the action film that fulfills the necessary criteria and the action film that fulfills the criteria and is a 'ripper of a show', while not immediately obvious in the written form, is certainly apparent in the spoken form. Perhaps the closest one can come to expressing the difference is that in the first example the children are saying, "the film had most of the right ingredients but somehow did not come together", while in the second example they are saying that the film had all the right ingredients and was a really good show as well.

The reverse, of course, is also true and there are a number of films, especially Elvis Presley films and some types of musicals such as *Saturday Night Fever*, that are considered 'action enjoyable' but not 'action excitement', in the sense of fulfilling the necessary criteria. The explanation of this seems to be that a number of films contain criteria applicable to both 'action' and 'no action' films and thus fall in between the two major categories. Thus, for example, in *Saturday Night Fever* the audience enjoyed the music and dancing and the hero fitted the necessary criteria well enough, but they found difficulties understanding the setting and language and were quite confused by the plot and by the reasons for characters' actions.

THE NO-ACTION FILM

The definition of a film as 'no action' is, like the definition of it as 'action', both a categorisation and a comment on the audience's enjoyment of the film. 'No action' becomes synonymous with films that lack the 'wham bam pow' element and are, in the majority of cases, not enjoyable. In other words, 'no action' is a way of saying the film did not have the necessary ingredients to be interesting, or, in some cases, that the audience had difficulty understanding it. A minority of films were actually designated 'no action'. A possible explanation for this is that the children are prepared to make an effort to like any film, because film nights are one of the few organised forms of entertainment in the community, therefore children get what entertainment value they can out of whatever they see. A second explanation is that the Darwin based film company who select and send the films to isolated Aboriginal communities on a regular basis was very experienced in selecting the types of films that Aboriginal audiences liked. Knowledge gained

over time of particular tastes is obviously important here. Significantly quite a few films that I selected from a list of the film company's holdings were among those designated 'no action' films - for example, the film *What's Up Doc?*, which I found very funny but which was received by the majority of the film audience in puzzled silence.

The criteria necessary for a film to be designated 'no action' are, in some ways, less clear than those that define an 'action' film. All 'no action' films, however, include at least one or more of the following factors:

1. Films that concentrate on overly complex plot developments at the expense of a simple straight story line - for example, 'thrillers' and the more subtle comedies.
2. Films that involve too much dialogue.
3. Films that concentrate on character development or the relationship between characters.
4. Films that involve overly long scenes.
5. Comedy films that rely on subtle humour.
6. Films that deal with situations and settings far removed from the audience's experiences.

The isolated community audience's limited understanding of the more complex forms of the English language and, especially in comedy films, the poor understanding of European norms and social expectations portrayed, helps to explain why those films that meet one or more of the above criteria are classified as 'no action'.

Significantly, in conversation, there was a decided reluctance to talk about the films designated 'no action'. In part this was a reflection of the trait evident in Aboriginal culture of giving, as far as possible, positive answers to questions or, alternatively, trying to avoid answering questions that require a negative answer. Also, to some extent, it was because if a film was considered 'no action' then it was also regarded as not worth talking about. A possible explanation for this is that the plot, setting or language of the film was so foreign to the audience's experience that the film was essentially incomprehensible. For example, *The Posiedon Adventure* follows the adventures of a group of people trapped in an overturned liner, trying to make their escape by climbing through the ship's interior to the hull. It is hard to imagine a less

familiar context for this isolated community audience, few of whom had ever seen, let alone been aboard a ship.

Classification of films by both adults and children at the isolated settlement into 'action' and 'no action' films is a categorisation based on qualities intrinsic to the film combined with an assessment of their enjoyment of it. This categorisation takes no cognisance of the film in terms of subject matter. Thus, if you asked the question of the isolated settlement audience, "What kind of film did you see last night?" or "How was the film?" the answer would be 'action' or 'no action' film. To get further information you would need to ask "What was it about?" or "Who was starring?"

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT? CLASSIFICATION BY SUBJECT MATTER

Classification of films by subject matter shows some similarities to the general classifications that a European audience might use, but are generally broader and include a wider variety of film types. Some subject matter classifications are in fact synonymous with a film being classified as an action film. Thus, for example, a Kung Fu film is, by definition, always considered an 'action film' in the sense of always being enjoyable and of meeting the criteria necessary to be designated 'action'. The following table sets out the categories of film by subject matter and shows the extent to which they are considered to be 'action' or 'no action'.

Subject Classification	Action Meeting the Necessary Criteria	Action Enjoyable	No Action	Action by Definition
1. Kung-Fu	Always	Always	Never	Yes
2. Nun-Chukka	Always	Always	Never	Yes
3. War One	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	No
4. Cowbee (Cowboy)	Mostly	Mostly	Sometimes	No
5. Spy One	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	No
6. Scary One	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	No
7. Funny One	Sometimes	Sometimes	Often	No
8. Silly One	Never	Never	Sometimes	No

The classification of a film as a 'Kung Fu One' is based on self-evident criteria, i.e. heavily dependent on fight scenes for the bulk of the entertainment value, and conforms to the kind of classification that a European audience might make. However, the Kung Fu classification encompasses all Martial or Fighting films ranging from *The Man From Hong Kong* type through Phillipino fight films to the Chinese martial arts film featuring, on occasion, a Chinese dialect soundtrack and Chinese sub-titles.

The nun-chukka, an oriental martial arts weapon, is normally used only in Kung Fu or martial arts films. Nevertheless, the use of this weapon in these films has made such an impression on my informants that films in which this weapon is used to any great extent are called 'Nun-Chukka' and form a separate category. This categorisation, however, is used only where the star of the film is not known to the audience. When a film features Bruce Lee using a nun-chukka it will be classified as a Bruce Lee film, with the term nun-chukka being used to identify the particular film, for example:

Inf. 1 : Fist of Fury 'e got nun-chukka.
Self : And Bruce Lee?
Inf. 1 : Mmm.....
Self : Is 'e nun-chukka or Bruce Lee?
Inf. 1 : Bruce Lee, Bruce Lee - 'e getchem nun-chukka.

War One films and Cowbees differ in no great respect from the way in which that genre is usually described. War One films do, however, include that category of films that would normally be labelled as Historical adventures and Epics. Thus films such as *Genghis Khan*, *El Cid*, and *The Four White Feathers* were all classified as War films along with such films as *Von Ryan's Express* and *A Bridge Too Far*.

Cowbee films similarly are easily classified, corresponding to the Western film genre and are very popular for much the same reasons. The Western has, as Armes notes in his book *Film and Reality*, 'a clear and gripping development and moves to a satisfying climax when everything is settled in a blaze of guns'. (1974, p.143)

Spy One and Scary One films have a degree of overlap in their classification and sometimes the two classifications are used for the same film, as for example, in the film *Don't Look Now*. Scary One films include films that belong to the Science Fiction, Suspense and Horror genres, for example, *Alien*, *Jaws*, and *Carrie*. However, the main criteria that a film had to meet to be classified as a Scary One was that it should have the audience in suspense and should have the ability to make them jump or scream.

Spy One films cover a wide range of films in which a European audience would probably distinguish a number of minor film genres. Thus, for Aboriginal audiences at the isolated community, gangster films, suspense thrillers, detective films, in fact any film that involved a reasonably convoluted plot, or significant moments of suspense, and a predominantly big city setting, were classified as 'Spy Ones'. For reasons I will discuss later, these films were more often classified as 'no action' films than any other type.

'Funny Ones' are, of course, self explanatory and the classification included just about any film from 'Laurel and Hardy' to animated cartoons. Quite a number of comedy films, however, were considered 'no action', like for example, *What's Up Doc*. The main criteria for a 'Funny One' was that the action needed to be very slapstick to be considered amusing.

WHO WAS STARRING? CLASSIFICATION BY CHARACTER

Films can be classified, not only by their subject but also by the name of the main actor. Certain popular actors such as Bruce Lee, John Wayne, Charles Bronson, and Clint Eastwood are used as the basis for assignment to a category which takes precedence over classification by subject matter. Thus when a film stars Bruce Lee or Clint Eastwood it is classified as a Bruce Lee or Clint Eastwood film regardless of its subject matter. Likewise if a 'Cowbee' stars John Wayne or Charles Bronson it is classified as a "Johnny Wayne film" or a "Bronson one". However, to a greater extent than subject matter classifications, the classifications of films by character is in a state of flux and can change to reflect the disappearance of 'old stars' such as John Wayne and the emergence of new ones. This appears to be happening with John Travolta at the present time with his use as a classification now being dependent on the number and type of films they will see in which he has the starring role.

The following table sets out the present accepted categories of film by reference to the main actor and shows the extent to which they are considered action or no action.

Actor's name Classification	Action (meeting the necessary criteria)	Action (Enjoyable)	No Action	Action by Definition
Bruce Lee	Always	Always	Never	Yes
Johnny Wayne	Often	Always	Never	No
Bronson	Always	Always	Never	Yes
Clint Eastwood	Always	Always	Never	Yes

CONTINUITY OF CHARACTER

Because the focus of attention in films enjoyed by Aborigines at the isolated settlement is most often concentrated on the central character, a continuity is often seen between widely disparate films that have in common the same actor. The focus of attention is on the central actor and the character the actor is portraying to the exclusion of the plot, theme, or setting, and each film is interpreted in the light of the central character played by the actor in

other films. When Charles Bronson played a melon farmer in *Mr Majestic* many of his actions were accompanied by audience shouts of 'Indian Breed', 'Indian Breed' and 'mouth organ', both references to back-ground material or antecedents established for the Bronson character in other films.

A concomitant of the continuity of the actor's 'personality' from one film to another is the way in which the informants make no distinction between the part played by the actor and the actor himself. Thus, when I mentioned to an informant, while watching a Charles Bronson movie, that the actor was at least fifty years old, he said, "E pretty good for old man", referring to all the athletic activities performed by the character Bronson was playing, which of course were performed by a stand in.

IDENTIFICATION OF FILMS BY SPECIFIC OBJECTS OR EVENTS

In conversation, specific identification of films is rarely by actual name of the film but by reference to the name of the central actor, if known, and/or by reference to a particular incident or object in the film. Thus the film *Jerimah Johnson* is specifically referred to as the 'old man film' because although Robert Redford was the central actor, there was a prophet type old mountain man, a minor actor in three scenes, that caught their attention. In the same way Charles Bronson films are identified by reference to their category, 'Charles Bronson' or 'Bronson' and then an aspect of the particular film - 'Indian Breed' for *Chato's Land*, 'Mouth Organ' for *Once Upon a Time in the West* and 'Watermelon man' for *Mr Majestic*.

This relation of actors and objects in films both to antecedents in other films and to recognisable aspects of life in the isolated community, gives an understanding of how my informants make sense of what they see. However, the way in which they classify films also indicates not only something about how aspects of the outside world are perceived, but something about the limited language experiences and situations open to these children.

The extent to which films are categorised by character and the importance attached to characters in films is a reflection of the emphasis on personal relationships in Aboriginal culture but also has a direct relationship to the limited horizons and relatively circumscribed lifestyle open to the children in the isolated community. Roy Armes discussing the popularity of movies makes the point that people like stories of adventurous open-air life that remove them from the everyday monotony of the factory bench or school desk. (1974). Notwithstanding some over-romanticised views of isolated Aboriginal communities to the contrary, the monotony of everyday

life in the isolated community may be of much the same quality as that of the factory bench or school desk.

At the isolated community no Aboriginal community member buys or receives newspapers, magazines or books, there is poor radio and at present no TV reception, trips to major centres such as Darwin or any large town are infrequent and of limited duration. Thus, experience of life for most of the children is limited to the one hundred and fifty members of the community and the occasional visitor from outside. Films, both in the reel to reel and the newer video format hold a position as the major source of information on the outside world and on the wider society generally.

The classification of films into 'action and no action' by my informants gives a fairly clear guide to the kind of film preferred by audiences at the isolated settlement. The preference for films that meet the 'action' criteria combined with the audience's unsophisticated knowledge of both the English language and of the film medium can provide, in the absence of other sources of experiences and information, a quite erroneous idea of behaviour patterns and social expectations relevant to the outside world. This is exemplified in the difficulty that my informants experienced in differentiating between an actor as an individual and the character he played. This difficulty is compounded by poor understanding of the difference between truth and fiction and of the nature of the realities portrayed in films. Just as for some urban European children American detective shows and comedy series on TV portray for them the reality of everyday America, so for my informants does the 'action film' portray some of the realities of the majority Australian and wider world culture.

The kind of categories used to classify films by these isolated Aboriginal children provides an insight into not only the children's and to some extent even the adults' understanding of films, but also to the limited language and experiential horizons, in the sense of the wider majority culture, that they have access to.

Films provide a window on the outside world for these isolated children but, as their criteria for, and film method of classification shows, much of what they see is not properly understood and cannot be related to their knowledge of the immediate world which is their every day reality. Only greater exposure to language and experience combined with an understanding of film as a medium will enable them to gain a greater and more sophisticated appreciation of the moving images they see and the nature of the particular view of reality which those images present.

References - see inside back cover.



