"Her husband barely in the grave … *and that dress*!": colour, gender and Lady Sarah Ashley

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Abstract

Despite the 'new' Hollywood concepts pervading post-modern films, Baz Luhrman's *Australia* has retained the forms, themes and genre trappings of past Hollywood productions, and this has led to considerable unfavourable media criticism. Nonetheless, *Australia*'s box-office success attests that the film's themes have registered favourably with audiences in Australia. Genre critics have highlighted the codes of narrative film as endowed with a kind of social reality, constituting an apparent social world and thereby reinforcing hegemonic conditions through repetitions across time. In this way they constitute both reflection and cause of cultural reproduction, and this paper examines one such code – colour.

Australia's colour use originates in symbolisms that exist 'outside' the film, embedded in the consciousness of audience members and beliefs about colour are reinforced by their appearance in an accepted symbolic tradition. Colour use promotes renditions of men and women with differing social standing and power and pertains to different gender performances. These performances are particularly compelling in the female characters because they form a potential through which women can express themselves, and a signal to the audience about 'correct' femininity and the different 'kinds' of women that patriarchy has declaimed possible.

Keywords: Colour, Gender, Costume, Australia, Femininity, Patriarchy

Introduction

Baz Lurhman's 2008 extravaganza *Australia* received considerable local criticism despite its relative box-office success in Australia, rating at 6th highest grossing film for its year (mpdaa.com). It had considerable competition in *The Dark Knight* (also starring an ex-patriot Australian) and Mama *Mia!* (concerning the 1980s pop group ABBA whose music bore special resonance with Australian audiences), which scooped the first two places. The remaining most-popular films were continuations of well-established franchises (*Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull* and *Quantum of Solace*) and a cinematic version of a television series (*Sex and the City*) each of

which had an established audience (imdb.com). All of these top-grossing films had been subjected to the preparations reserved for what Garrett (2007:25) calls "'new' Hollywood's high-concept" production, and whose appeal to audiences is wider than individual genre preferences would imply.

Australia has kept the forms, themes and genre trappings of past Hollywood productions alive whilst imbuing them with new historical and cultural meaning. One of the ways that this is accomplished is through the new Hollywood drama film's ability to cast a contemporary eye over historical gender inequalities (Garrett 2007:153). Cook (2005) has linked such revised historicity as an opportunity for the examination of gendering issues and it is this aspect that I intend to address in this paper. *Australia*'s genre presentations − western, war, romance, adventure and melodrama − are elements in the story of Lady Sarah Ashley, a prissy English aristocrat who is transformed into an Australia-loving 'outback' home-maker and de facto mother. Lady Ashley's metamorphosis into 'Sarah' (to her paramour, Drover) and 'Missus-boss' (to the Aboriginal child, Nulla) nonetheless follows the traditional Hollywood genre ideals, despite the post-modern values adhering to the bodies and actions of the leading characters. Furthermore, *Australia*'s historical drama suffers issues of historical authenticity that Garrett (2007:190) maintains are more problematic the more recent the past being explored through the medium of film. There are not many Australians alive today who had survived or were contemporary to the bombing of Darwin, but it was a modern historical period, well documented and still celebrated by Australians, so *Australia*'s historic credentials have become a considerable part of the criticism levelled at it (see for example, Costello 2008). *Australia* also suffers what Dyer (1979:22) had noted: that leading characters played by Hollywood 'stars' are subsumed under the star personas of their respective actors.

Erens (1990:95) identifies this phenomenon as an opportunity for the female star's resistance to objectification, yet the romance/melodrama of *Australia* is played out in the typicality of romance narratives described by Garrett (2007:100, 121). Such subsumption also results in *Australia*'s lowered visual emphasis on gratuitous violence and sexual voyeurism, as star-power does not rely on such conventions in order to enhance the film's wider audience appeal. And in keeping with the tradition of undermining women's credibility in film (Artel & Wengraf 1990:10), Nulla assumes the place of the condescending male narrator, his viewpoint modulated by his experiences as a male half-caste Aboriginal child and subject of the film's Stolen Generations theme.

Historical films are by definition costume dramas, and so have also been criticised for their "preoccupation with feminine fripperies" (Garrett 2007:189). Yet the role of costume in film has been variously subordinated to body language as an index of power (Arbuthnot & Seneca 1990:118), made capable of "repositioning destabilizing gender performances" (MacRory 1999:53), and attributed the potential "to disguise, to alter, even to reconstruct, the wearer's self" (Kuhn 1985:53). In this light, costumes may be considered as indices of varying 'types' of power available to the wearer. Thus the formal riding garb Sarah assumes at her introduction to the audience contrasts strongly with the loose-fitting shirt and trousers of her triumphant emergence from the Australian outback – signs of her differential relation to power in class terms. Similarly, the more sombre and carefully styled/tailored garments worn by the Australian whites contrast with the gaudy, ill-fitting or minimalist garments on the bodies of the Aboriginal characters, and so serve to signify racial differentiation. Costume is the indicator *par excellence* of gender in Hollywood film, so attention to costume will enable *Australia*'s gender performances to be examined. Sarah's

costumes signal the types of power that she possesses at various stages of the narrative, yet she remains firmly ensconced in the 'feminine' – her costumes, even when cross-dressed as a drover, retain markers of her gender. Gendering of costumes occurs through style and colour. Style enhances or disguises physical attributes/defects, so is a major indicator of the wearer's gender, but colour also plays an important role. It is at the junction of style and colour that gendered power is symbolised, and so colour can be regarded as a metalinguistics signal that is added to the narrative in much the same way as has been identified for films' music scores (Garrett 2007:66). Salih and Butler (2004:23) described gender as the "corporeal locus of cultural meanings" where choice is restricted to "a network of deeply entrenched cultural norms", and these norms impose a colour symbolism that extends to the costumes of characters. In this, *Australia* offers the traditional Hollywood uses of colour to ascertain and typify the motivations of the characters as they traverse the narrative. Thus not only do Sarah's costumes signal her cultural activities, their colours modify the readings available to each costume style. The information obtainable from the colours of the costumes further evidences the gender performances culturally available to each character. As imparters of broader cultural mores, films construct gender in very specific ways, and the linking of colour to 'types of women' is the particular focus of this paper.

Colour and gender and *Australia*

Film can be considered a ritualised social drama – it enacts the anxieties permeating the social body, and can function to point to resolutions of other socio-cultural concerns such as class and race as well as gender conflicts. When aimed at women, films can produce "an important index of socio-cultural fantasies, expectations and

attitudes towards gender identity" (Garrett 2007:61). Fantasies are enacted using colour signals to promote emphasis on one specific aspect of the performance. One defining aspect of ritual social dramas is the requirement for repetitive performances to ensure that socially-established sets of meanings are re-experienced as mundane and ritualised legitimacies (Salih and Butler 2004:114). Colour becomes such a marker in its repetition in various gender performances – the male characters of films generally wear the colours blue, brown and achroma (the white-grey-black continuum) whereas the female characters are endowed with a multiplicity of hues, including those associated with men. Yet not all colours are presented equally, and some are reserved for specific performances, such as the red dress Sarah wears to the charity ball. These performances present a very precise way of being for Sarah, and each is linked to a change in her attitudes and development as a romantic heroine.

Giannetti (1996:22) described colour as a "subconscious element in film", appealing to strong emotions and received passively as a mood enhancement rather than localised as innate definitive aspects of objects. Certainly, colour's use to distinguish between the harsh Australian landscape and the pristine fields of the Ashley's British home is designed to create mood. The heightened colours of her homeland seem to empower a black-clad Lady Sarah, and she is introduced as headstrong and imperious, a woman determined to impress her own form of control onto the surroundings and the people therein. In this, Sarah Ashley has much in common with the white-clad Scarlet O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the archetypical melodramatic heroine (Stokes 2007). Both women are introduced to their audience from a position of power – Scarlet is the centrepiece of a tableau of rival suitors, and Sarah is raised above others on her horse, issuing her edicts from a physical position of superordination – and both are led by their positions to undertake a journey that will lead them into

participation in masculine activities. Black and white, far from predicting the goodness or badness of an individual character as portrayed in traditional monochrome films, are clearly interchangeable in colour films. Their interpretation is undoubtedly a subconscious activity, but the presentation of gender using colour follows certain well-established paradigmic lines.

For Jameson (1990:220), colour is supplementary – "a bonus of pleasure that adds nothing to its own content', yet capable of opening up "new and equally 'supplementary' spaces for libidinal investment". Colour's supplementarity works to enhance gender stances that are requisite for the various genre narratives and so normalises these for the audience. Thus the blue and white of Sarah's costume as she races across the world to reclaim her errant husband sits uncomfortably on her body as she reveals her shock and determination silently through voice-over telegrams messages. She is enacting her proper domestic role of striving to support her spouse, but also her greatest feminine failure – being silenced by the shock of witnessing her lingerie scattered on the street. Sarah's blue costumes all relate to narrative portrayal of a woman needing to 'bite her tongue', or, having given vent to her feelings/desires, finding them ignored or countered by masculine pronouncements. Most frequently, Sarah wears blue during her unsuccessful attempts to keep Drover by her side, yet her stilted attempt at 'mothering' a grieving Nullah is also accomplished in a blue costume, albeit a less dramatic hue. Notable too are the confrontations with the villain, Neil Fletcher, whose mantra "Pride's not power" reminds both character and audience of the price of confrontation with patriarchy, and force her to swear others to silence as well. The supplementary space opened by this use of blue clearly demonstrates the 'correct' attitude to be taken by a woman in response to men's

demands, and so reinforces the libidinal message that women's proper role is to be seen, not heard, in their allotted domestic spaces.

Metz (1982) identified both cinematic and non-cinematic codes to which colour can also lay claim – as a cinematic code, colour can identify individuals and their gender performances, and as a non-cinematic code, colour reflects the culturally-held assumptions about these gender performances. Thus Drover's white evening attire distinguishes him from the other black-and-white formally-clad men at the charity ball as well as from his own prior performances as stockman, leader and fighter in which his costumes consisted of variations of blue, brown and achroma. Drover is transformed in this white costume to the cleanest-of-clean knight errant, rescuing his lady from her initially futile challenge to colonial and patriarchal attitudes. Drover's life is signalled in this costume to have altered its path from embittered-but-stoic social outcast to acceptance of the superior wisdom of Sarah's 'feminine' values. Far from playing a "peripheral' role as Currie (1999:51) maintains is the function of such filmic conventions, colour helps establish and maintain socially available discourses on gender.

Lady Sarah Ashley and *that* dress

The red ball-gown is more indicative of Sarah's gendered sexuality than is her nudity. Sarah's red dress defines her as a woman who is *capable* of sexual transgressions as well as culpable. Both these positions imply agency, and as such, are usurpations of masculine *droit de seignior*. At the charity ball, Sarah's dress invites the gaze in its close-fitting vibrancy, and receives more. It is also the most saturated colour worn by any woman in the film. The nearest saturation level and approximation of red worn by any other woman in *Australia* belongs to Nullah's mother, who drowns for her

challenge to patriarchy's racist demands. Sarah's red takes primacy in the ballroom and of the conversation, and she is at similar risk of irrevocable damage - social death - a reading established in the critical remonstration of this paper's title, available to the audience, but not yet to Sarah. What is at stake here is a struggle for power on multiple levels, and Sarah's red ball-gown becomes the focus of patriarchy's ability to pit "woman against woman" (Rohrer Paige 1996:151).

Butler's reminder (1990:92) that the "body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations" permits a focus on the markers of such meaning.   Sarah voluntarily engages the colonial patriarchy, threatening to expose their miscegenous proclivities but she also engages with a greater and underlying social force in the matronly voice *which speaks to the audience as Sarah descends to the dance floor.* As Sarah takes the centre of attention, the film focuses on a woman-delivered patriarchal voice, stern with disapproval and intent on hegemony, criticising both Sarah's garment *and* her behaviour.   The implication is that Sarah's activities are antisocial. By becoming active, Sarah usurps the masculine role – "[i]t is a male prerogative to encroach on women's space not only through look, but bodily as well" (Arbuthnot and Seneca1990:117) – but does so in the most vibrantly visible of colour-shapes.   Her appropriation of the gaze (see Mulvey 1990) occurs on two levels – she becomes the object gazed upon but she uses this gaze as a power to impel men to permit her entry into their conversation and to listen to her. Such audacity, Salih and Mulvey (2004:130) elucidate, "brings with it ostracism, punishment and violence not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions". The transgressive pleasures belong to the audience – it is *their* voyeurism of the transgression on the screen that permits illicit pleasure and concomitantly reinforces the compulsory nature of heterosexual norms.

Transgression is frequently linked to the colour red in films. Cook and Johnston (1990:22) apportion "red for danger and red for sex" and Giannetti (1996:20) allocates red as "the colour of danger…[of] violence, of blood". Rohrer Paige (1996:147) presents an alternate view – red "hints of rebellion [and] simultaneously presents a visible reminder of the penalty for women's insurrection (the colour *red*, symbolic of passion, also suggests spilled blood)". In wearing the red gown, Sarah demonstrates her rebellion against the hypocrisy of the ruling elites of the era. For her detractors, the red symbolises the very danger that her actions create for all women – in being assertive, Sarah potentially represents all women and so pushes them into conflict with patriarchy, a crisis usually met by cries of "monstrous" and "unfeminine" (Gilbert and Gubar, cited in Rohrer Paige 1996). Certainly, red carries with it, for women in film, the stain of transgression – the women who appear in red are often punished, usually by death (as in *Casino Royal* 2006) or social ostracism (*Gone with the Wind* 1939). That this social symbol – red and female usurpation of power – should provide the same lesson in 1939 as it does in the 21st Century attests to the vast discursive power in some colour symbolisms.

The red ball-gown is not Sarah's only red garment. Earlier in the film, she is seen covertly watching Drover as he interacted with her horse, Capricornia. Here she wears a red patterned close-fitting pink dress. Her first transgression – appropriating the gaze and its concomitant desire – is seen only by the audience as she descends the stairs. She interrupts Drover's concentration, and offers him employment as her station manager. This exposition of her dream/desire is her second transgression, one against the masculinity projected by Drover. Unaware of her effect, she dares to order the life of another gender, a masculine prerogative. This time, her punishment is swift, and comes from Drover's repudiation of her offers. His "that's the way it is" is met

by her "doesn't mean that's the way it should be" and challenges the hegemony that is represented by the society 'out there' in the film's environment. Unlike her success in the red dress, this pink-and-red dress shows Sarah's resistance to patriarchy effectively curtailed. Drover wins the argument and leaves her to her regrets. Pink dress is a filmic signal that frequently indicates a woman has fallen 'in love', leaving her vulnerable to patriarchy's critique and guidance. Resistive efforts of women in pink are reminiscent of childish outbursts – Fran in *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) is another example – which are 'managed' by the men to whom the resistances were addressed, resulting in the women being brought to calm and reason via paternal wisdom.

The differences between Sarah's woman-in-red and her woman-in-pink lie in the different responses to her by the men in the narrative. Red presents resistance with strength, whilst the resistance implicit in pink (as admixture of red and white) is complicit in her defeat. In red, Sarah can make claims upon patriarchy as an equal and must be defeated by subsuming her actions under the umbrella of sexualised meanings. Thus her demands for a fair hearing come to nothing once she is linked to the "as good as black" Drover in a pejoratively sexualising narrative. Her earlier demands of Drover, nonetheless brought asunder by his superior reasoning, were met less derisively because the pink signal of her costume infantilised her dream, and so could be dealt with as childish wish-fullness. This challenge to patriarchy is an unequal one – Sarah, being 'in love', cannot gainsay the subject of her love. In the romance narrative, it is the heroine's vacillation between her lifestyle aspirations and her attraction to the romantic hero that structure the readings available for the audience (Garrett 2007:104). For Sarah, this is presented as the choice between red and pink – she cannot have both.

Conclusion

Metz (1982) proposes that film language must always be motivated due to its creation as artefact (McCormick 1975:24). From this he extrapolates that a film must retain coherence regarding the cultural and specialised codes embodied therein, and this coherence promotes a film's readability. These codes arise from patterns of meaning repeated across time and genre, endowing them with a social reality, as though they were constitutive of the social world (Tudor 1974:213). Thus they are interpreted as both a reflection and a cause of cultural reproduction. This is the case in the use of colour in films. *Australia*'s colour use originates in symbolisms that exist 'outside' the film and within the consciousness of audience members, and these beliefs are reinforced by the appearance of a colour in an accepted symbolic tradition.

Examination of colour usage presents distinct gender links that create representations of particular 'kinds' of people, most notably, particular 'types' of women. Since gender is 'chosen' from a limited repertoire of culturally available parameters (Salih and Butler 2004:22) it is unsurprising that men's colours should represent fewer stereotypes than women's colours. The colours in which heroines are dressed promote renditions of women with differing social standing and power, and these representations are consistent with social beliefs regarding colour and activity. The super-charged woman-in-red is always seen as a threat, whereas the adoring woman-in-pink is child-like and the silenced woman-in-blue is domestically obedient to patriarchal demands. Each of these colours pertains to a different gender performance and so forms a potential through which a woman can express herself. *Australia*'s Sarah Ashley's performance conforms to the action-and-colour combinations expected by knowing audiences of female characters in genre films.

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