

Seeing Culture, Seeing Schapelle

Schapelle Corby as (Inter)National Visual Event

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Abstract: The recent arrest and conviction of Australian Schapelle Corby on charges of drug smuggling in Indonesia ignited a range of national and international political and racialised tensions. This paper explores the Schapelle Corby phenomenon as an intersection of events and practices across the field of visual culture. It places the analysis of Schapelle Corby related visual texts and associated sites within an examination of history, national identity, national security and public memory. Thus the paper seeks to articulate and explore Australia's place within the Asia-Pacific, and the resurgence of nationalistic and neocolonial discourses within the contexts of globalisation and the 'war on terror'.

Keywords: Visual Culture, Terror, Representation, National Identity

THIS PAPER EXAMINES the cultural significance of the case of Australian Schapelle Corby, a young woman arrested for importing marijuana into Bali, Indonesia. Images of young Australians falling foul of Asian drug laws occupy a larger and more powerful place in Australian culture than ever before. This is primarily to do with the Schapelle Corby case, the very public event it became and the range of contemporary issues it cuts across (national identity, femininity, border security and terror). In attending to the public interest in Schapelle, it is possible to track what the case mobilises within Australian culture, and how it speaks to definitions of Australianness within historical and contemporary contexts.

Boycott Bali

In June of 2005 (shortly after Corby was convicted) I visited Australia's Far North Queensland. After a few days in the rainforest I took a cab and headed south to Cairns. Entering the stretch between Kuranda and the city I saw a sprawling white house on a rolling green property facing the freeway. Hanging from the top veranda was a large piece of canvas (approximately five metres in length and about two metres in height). Painted in sloppy red capitals and flapping in the breeze was a phrase now familiar to many Australians: 'Boycott Bali'. I muttered 'wow' to myself, thinking that someone must feel incredibly passionate to turn their house into a very public statement about recent events. The driver of the cab turned to me and in his best nasal strine and said 'Oh, that's about that girl, that *Shaarpelle*...'

And it was very much about that girl. Schapelle Corby was (and still is to a lesser extent) an Australian cultural event of monumental proportions, an

event that, like so many others, would test the mettle of the Australian-Indonesian relationship. Corby, a 27-year-old Queensland woman caught with 4.1 kilograms of marijuana hidden in her boogy board bag at Bali airport, maintained that the drugs had been planted in her unlocked bag by airport baggage-handlers somewhere between the Gold Coast, Sydney and Denpasar. In the early days of her trial it was thought she might receive the death sentence. Referred to as 'our Schapelle' in the Australian press, and 'Ratu Marijuana' (marijuana queen) in Indonesia's, she was found guilty and sentenced to twenty years in Kerobokan prison. Bayuni, writing in *The Jakarta Post* (May 30, 2005), says that 'ordinarily, this would have been just another drug trial involving a foreigner', but the attention it received made it 'a special case' for the Denpasar district court.

Corby's seemingly harsh sentence prompted the 'Boycott Bali' campaign to which the banner refers, encouraging Australians to spend their tourist dollars in destinations other than Indonesia. It also resulted in demands for a return of money donated for tsunami aid, as well as suspicious white packages being sent to the Indonesian embassy in Canberra. So this is an event, in (ex British leader) Macmillan's sense of the unexpected and the political, but it's also an event that is rooted in the traditions and tensions of Australian national and international self-description.

In order to locate the power of the Schapelle Corby phenomenon, this paper moves beyond theories of either guilt or conspiracy and the partial insights gained from equating Schapelle's excessive media attention with physical attractiveness. Instead the Corby case is treated as a primarily visual event, which is built on and invigorated by other events, tropes and stories, both nationally (in Australia) and



internationally. I advance an understanding of this event as founded in the intertextual and the genealogical, mapping its perception in terms of cultural persistence and change. Focussing on visual constructions of Schapelle as 'Australian national daughter', I argue that she localises the universal visual currencies of female mourning and female vulnerability. I use the case to articulate a nexus between national and global socio-political concerns, resurgent Anglo-Australian nationalism and the ongoing 'War on Terror'. The visual event reveals itself to be a meeting of multiple events and transformations, speaking to traditions and practices across the fields of visual culture, identity politics and beyond.

Events

In Mirzoeff's (1999: 13) well-known definition, a visual event refers to 'the interaction of the visual sign, the technology that enables and sustains the sign, and the viewer'. Whilst the sign-viewer-technology relationship offers a seemingly straightforward understanding of visuality, in practice it reveals itself to be anything but. For this reason Stanworth (2002: 107) suggests visual culture is 'a short cut to describing a complex set of relations between visual phenomena, meanings, and... the ramifications of symbolic actions', by asking 'how do images and visual phenomena come to have meaning at a given time and place?'

Embodying 'a complex set of relations', the visual event stands as a composite of visual signs (and other modalities), experiences and technologies together with their associated political and social attachments – all of these always in the plural. Making sense of the Schapelle Corby phenomenon means making sense of the events which form the contexts in which it can be read, consumed and played out. How else could I make sense of that banner hanging from the house? How could I not think of Bali without Schapelle and other incarcerated Australians, Schapelle without Australian hysteria, Australian-Indonesian relations, the Bali-Bombings, the Tsunami, the London Bombings and so on? I could not read the banner as *a* technology, as *a* sign, and see myself as *the* viewer. I participate in the event with an awareness of the parallelism that, as Tufte (1997: 103) has argued, 'provides a coherent architecture for organizing and learning from images' which by establishing a structure of rhythms and relationships... becomes the poetry of visual information.' Yet it is not poetry without politics. Like so many others, I live the various and multiple connections the banner makes and I bear both its historical weight and its vision of the future. It is a reminder that in studying visual culture we might 'find it increasingly uncomfortable to ignore our subjective

investment in the maintenance of visual regimes of power' (Stanworth, 2002: 108). A visual event is less the definition of a specific relationship between a generalised viewer and technological mediation, than a relationship of and between histories, technologies, powers, meanings, actions and ramifications.

As sites of such relations, visual events are grounded simultaneously in persistence and change. Nelson (1998: 93-94) defines an event as 'an organized sequence of actions through time and space that has a perceived goal or end point'. In this view an event is strategic, and as studies on computational language modeling indicate (Siskind, 2003), event recognition is reliant on patterns of stimuli, predictability and classification. In a less mathematical (though no less scientific) way, ecological approaches seek to understand events as the combination of stable and adaptive aspects of a given environment. These are not approaches unsuited to cultural analysis of visual events. What remains stable and what is adapted through the public construction of and participation in Corby's case? What does the inherent visuality of the event stimulate? In short where do we locate persistence and how do we understand change with respect to the images we see and visual narratives they both continue and create?

The Daughter Who is Australia

I am concerned then with the visual event as cultural strategy that services particular discourses of Australian nationalism at specific moments in time. William Routt's (1989) essay 'The Fairest Child of the Motherland' draws attention to the figure of the daughter-who-is-Australia in Australian films of the 1920s and 30s to articulate the colonial context in a range of films from the period. The construction of female figures is directly linked to the creation of white colonial identity, where the daughter, usually a bush heroine (occasionally urban) reaffirms connections with England and Empire through 'class and character' thus compensating for the often 'scandalous' and 'populist ways' of the menfolk (the father in particular) (45). Similarly Schapelle's image is able to mask, dramatise and normalise a range of familial, domestic and international behaviours by reconstituting Australianness as a 'damsel in distress', through whom the nation's historical and recent coalitions are reaffirmed. The question at the centre of this saga and anchoring the Corby image has always been 'What if this happened to your daughter?'

Unlike her colonial predecessors, Corby embodies a postnational connection between white femininity and the Australian beach, whose incarceration suggests Australian and Western ways of being as under threat. Numerous images and descriptions of

Schapelle recall the Australian 'beach girl' quests of the 40s, 50s and 60s, and the young protagonist from the opening of the Sydney Olympic Games: a white girl with her beach towel, her thongs and her zinc cream. Through decades of Bali surfing holidays, the beach girl has been one of the key Australian exports to Indonesia, marking the island as an extension of Australian space and identity.

From Australian films such as *Puberty Blues* (1980) to the Cronulla 'race riots' in December 2005, the Australian beach girl endures as a source of both agitation and adulation. The Cronulla riots were linked by the local member of parliament to the death of six Anglo-Australian women from the beachside community in the first Bali terror attacks, and the gang rape of white Australian girls in 2001 (*The Age*, December 12 2005). Whilst the film exposed the misogyny of white men, the bombings and rapes were unproblematically attached to those 'of Middle-Eastern appearance', and the riots dramatised tensions between the two. In all, the currency remains the same; the body of the white female persists as the unit of exchange in an aggressive adherence to historical tropes of nationalism. Schapelle occupies the place of the mythical Australian beach girl (the daughter who is Australia) now trapped in a 'strange' land, in non-white hands, and at the mercy of foreign systems and institutions.

The national daughter's innocence is a public necessity, particularly if racially motivated forms of violence committed in her name are to make any sense. Helen Razer (2005) notes that, 'with her Gold Coast heritage and retro fashion... we see her as an artefact from a fast-disappearing Australia'. As if to ironically reclaim this lost beach girl, the recent international advertising campaign for the Australian Tourism Commission features a bikini clad model on the beach asking 'where the bloody hell are you?' Ironic, because Schapelle is not in Australia, and is not likely to be any time soon. If the beach girl is to represent the nation she must remain unblemished, she must overcome the changes Corby represents – the clean and sunny must confront the unclean and the dark, as it resists the potential loss of innocence that a guilty verdict brings.

Woman, Why are you Weeping?

The possibility of such innocence and its connections to nationalism can be located within the signifying capacities of female suffering as a response to 'terror'. Throughout Schapelle Corby's trial, the bulk of available images showed Schapelle sobbing uncontrollably. It seemed the more Schapelle was shown to be crying, the more palpable and transparently obvious her innocence became (at least to an Australian audience). For a nation dealing with the

loss of lives in two separate Indonesian terror attacks, Corby reanimates the trope of the 'weeping woman', centralising her transnational and transhistorical signifying powers within a specifically Australian visual event. The weeping woman, offered as a figure of redemption in the Christian Bible, and as an inconsolable ghost in Hispanic and Mexican mythology, bears witness to the horrors of her immediate environment. The caption title in the Tate gallery for Picasso's iconic 1937 painting explains that after 'the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936' *Weeping Woman* became 'an emblem of the suffering of the Spanish nation' because it 'captures a mood of moral anxiety that haunted those who witnessed the war from abroad' (*Tate Online*, 2005).

So too do the tears of Schapelle play out a visual connection between the suffering woman and explicitly national concerns. Picasso's woman marks a relationship between feminine emotional excess and those with a vested interest in (inter)national outcomes over which they have no real control. In a similar politics of affect, Corby localises and personifies Australian loss experienced in Bali and Western experiences of terror globally; her weeping is a sign of the times and marks Australia as *at war* and *in a coalition*. Here, where the 'weeping woman' persists, the 'moral anxiety' haunting Australians is precisely the moment of change which the Corby event embodies. Croft (2005) suggests that where the Bali Bombing of 2002 'mobilised the trope of innocent Australians dying abroad for a tragic patriotism, "Corby" individualises the trope in the figure of a young, photogenic woman'.

With reference to the silent Australian film *The Woman Suffers*, Creed (1995: 88) suggests Australian visual culture has a history of fascination with 'the exquisite suffering' of females in Western literary and artistic traditions. For this reason the absence of weeping in the case of Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton, the Australian woman who claimed her baby was eaten by a dingo in 1980, was seen as confirmation of both her guilt and heartlessness in the ferocious swirl of public attention that surrounded her case for over fifteen years. Drawing a comparison between Chamberlain and Corby, Anne Summers (2005) observes that both 'have been the vehicles for an extraordinary national fixation,' and 'both cases involved previously unremarkable young women who became infamous for being charged with crimes they both denied committing.'

Jailed for the baby's murder, Lindy was eventually released, pardoned and welcomed back into a somewhat embarrassed and apologetic Australia. The National Library in Canberra houses twenty thousand letters from Australians to Lindy, dating from 1980-1996. Yet Corby reveals that the public need for tears, and the fascination with seeing female suffer-

ing, has not diminished (750,000 Australians watched her verdict live during the middle of the workday). Referring again to terrorist attacks in Bali, Summers (2005) concludes that 'regardless of what happens to Corby, she has served a national need for catharsis and retribution'.

And whilst the weeping woman is an image of undeniable persistence, her presence within the context of global politics is now underwritten by an awareness, if not suspicion, of the strategic invocation of her image. Shanaz Rashid, an Iraqi exile dubbed the 'weeping woman' by the British press in 2004, made a plea to governmental delegates in the UK for the continued presence of British troops in Iraq. After the vote to withdraw troops was defeated, Rashid (the wife of a Minister in the interim Iraqi administration) was suggested to have strong connections with the CIA and was revealed to be heading a children's fund that draws direct financial support from a lottery administered by Blair's government (Maguire, 2006). Whilst no one has doubted her first-hand experience of violence and atrocity, the spectacular event of her public weeping (her visibility and her performance) is ultimately underwritten by politicised attachments. The endless weeping of Picasso's woman is likewise a visual event essaying the interminable effect of violence and terror, which has since has been used to particular political effect (in public protests against the war in Iraq, see *Innovative Minds*, Online, 2003).

Dancing with Wolves

If both the stable and adaptive aspects of the weeping woman are visual expressions of the conditions of terror, the understanding of her strategic value changes between cultural contexts. Schapelle's displays of fragility were interpreted differently by the Indonesian court, where she was warned not to 'pretend' (Moore, 2005a). Such public performances signified purposeful delays to an administrative process already hampered by the media scrum and the presence of both pro-Corby and anti-Corby agitators. In the final days of the trial, a tearful Corby, reading from a handwritten statement, declared her innocence and begged for her freedom. Much was made of the statement not being immediately translated and that one of the judges remained reading a book, the title of which translates as *Life Imprisonment* (Moore, 2005b). Explicit Australian racism soon followed: Media commentator Alan Jones deemed it an 'outrage' that an Indonesian court would not hold a trial in English, and Malcolm T. Elliot (a Sydney radio announcer) publicly referred to the judges as 'straight out of the trees', saying 'give them a banana and away they go' (Ellis, 2005: 18-19). The judges were subsequently represented

in most media as incompetent, disinterested, corrupt in the extreme, and finally heartless and barbaric for failing to register the significance of 'our' Schapelle's tears.

In the cultural context of the US led War on Terror, a discourse that requires both monsters and vulnerable prey, Schapelle was caught behind enemy lines (an idea which lies at the heart of public calls to 'bring Schapelle home' through a prisoner exchange program, or calls for the military to 'bust her out'). 'Australians fancy they see something of the Gallipoli spirit in Corby', writes Eric Ellis (2005: 19), 'the humble 'Aussie battler', abandoned by her government and struggling in vain to overcome an insurmountable foreign adversary.' Despite Corby's defence implicating Australian airport security, Indonesia became both the site and the perpetrator of terror against Corby as the visual symbol of Australian identity and values. As Koo (2005, par. 20) argues, 'the political power of the 'War on Terror' discourse is ... one which is enabled and maintained by the politics of fear, threat, danger and difference.'

The Schapelle event becomes the symbolic mobilisation of the vulnerable Western self, and its attendant resurgence of Orientalist otherness. The historical usefulness of images of white women to the project of colonialism and foreign policy now informs the integration of post 911 American security ethics into Australian legislation and Australian representation. In this way Schapelle functions as the Little Red Riding Hood of counter-terrorist discourse, in which 'the shared modernity of the monster, the despot, the delinquent and the onanist come together... Such knowledge – now more than ever – is at a premium' (Rai, 2004: 548). Schapelle was potentially to be killed for her crime (although no-one has ever been put to death in Indonesia for marijuana possession, and no western women have ever been put to death in Indonesia). As Donald (2000: 158) observes, 'the visibility of the white female is both public and privileged' but is also open to being 'symbolically manipulated'. Thus Schapelle is not cloaked in the *petit chaperon rouge*, but in the Australian flag (red, white and blue). In this version Schapelle leaves her mother's house in Brisbane to visit a female relative (her sister Mercedes) far away. Apparently unaware of the 'goodies' she is carrying, she is interfered with, en route and taken into captivity by an Other who neither respects or acknowledges her virtue or innocence. Perrault's 1697 version of the Red Riding Hood story ended with a warning that began 'Little girls, this seems to say, Never stop upon your way, Never trust a stranger-friend; No one knows how it will end. As you're pretty so be wise; Wolves may lurk in every guise...' (in Orenstein, 2002).

Female virtue and safety are susceptible to the inherent deviance of the foreign and the strange. Now

the image of vulnerability becomes a form of 'sexual terrorism' of the kind deployed by Bush during the 2004 US Election, where his counter-terrorist platform saw his vote increase the most within the white female demographic. Eisenstein (2002: 81) suggests that such women live 'alongside the terror/fear of rape: we do not walk alone at night if we can help it, we do not put ourselves at risk if we can figure out what this means, we fear for our daughters' safety when they are among men we do not know.' Built into Schapelle's signifying powers (as national daughter) then are the complexities of Anglo-European female mobility as it stands in for the dangers faced by the 'good', the 'innocent' and the 'democratic' in the West. If Schapelle can't save herself from the wolves in foreign lands (let alone at home), who will save her, and by extension the symbols of Australianness she articulates?

As a cultural narrative (of terror), the Schapelle story is one of ongoing vulnerability without satisfactory resolution. Unlike Nicole Kidman in *Bangkok Hilton* (1989), she cannot escape the Asians using her father's knowledge of WWII prisons. Her continuously terrorised face shares the signifying powers of the wolf between a number of figures within the visual event (from customs officers, to judges, police, clerics and convicted bombers). The Schapelle-terror connection is made visually explicit by a range of texts, which place her image against that of Muslim cleric Abu Bakir Bashir, complaining of the difference in their sentences. In a story titled 'Nation's Fury', *The Daily Telegraph*, (28 May 2005) framed the comparison in the following terms:

This terrorist planned the murder of 88 Australians and got 2 years. Yesterday Schapelle Corby got 20 ... In a double standard that has outraged the Australian nation ... Corby received ten times the sentence given to accused Bali terror mastermind Abu Bakir Bashir.

The story failed to mention that two people already convicted were given the death sentence. On the ABC's *Mediawatch* program (May 30, 2005), Liz Jackson stated that '*The Telegraph's* misleading comparison with Abu Bakar Bashir is the kind of coverage that has characterised this case.' The 'nation's fury' continues as the Howard government recently alerted Indonesia to Australia's outrage at Bashir's release in June of this year.

Whilst the Bashir comparison placed Schapelle within conditions that seem to favour terrorism over innocence and virtue, images in a story on Schapelle's living conditions in the *Gold Coast Bulletin* (July 16, 2005) framed her squarely as the target of terrorism:

From a window in the tower of the Kerobokan prison, the evil eyes of Bali bomber Imam Samudra stare down on Schapelle Corby. It has become a twice-daily ritual that haunts the former Gold Coast beauty student... she points up to the tower that houses the Bali bombers... "There's steps leading up to the top but it's not used, but there are four cells down the bottom. Samudra is in that one," she says, pointing to a window nearest to the walkway. "He knows I come past on my visits at 10.30am and 1.30pm most days and he is always at the windows staring at me," she says.

The arrangement of the front page tells the story – Indonesian terrorist large and imposing at the top of the frame, a traumatised Schapelle in motion trying to get past, and the large, bold font: His Evil Eyes. The gaze of the wolf as monster-terrorist is firmly fixed on the figure of Australian vulnerability. The position of the terrorist Other, founded in Foucaultian abnormality and Derridean monstrosity is rendered a psychotic state (Rai, 2004: 550), framing all Indonesian men and by association all non-Western, non-Christian, non-Anglo/European men. The wolf is 'made' through the extremism of the un-Australian, anti-Australian, irrational terrorist image that keeps a range of ideas about the seemingly 'true' and 'good' nature of Australian whiteness in place. He may be behind bars, but he is watching her – is she safe? Is your daughter safe? Are any of us safe?

This fear essays the need for an explicit reinscribing of earlier 'us' and 'them' taxonomies (from colonisation to federation and 'White Australia', from the WWII context to the post 911, post Bali, post-multicultural Australia). The case has also provided Indonesia with an understanding of significance of the Corby image event to Australia's sense of itself, and of its value within cross-cultural exchanges. When Australia admitted West Papuan asylum seekers into the country, Indonesia took offence, and suggested that this has thrown doubt over a possible prisoner exchange program for Corby and others detained there. Australia has responded with offshore processing of such asylum seekers and the development of security treaty with Indonesia.

Conversely, as a reminder that both the tears (and the terror to which they refer) are never-ending, it is in the belly of the wolf that Schapelle remains. Whilst she continues to serve her sentence in Kerobokan, she is useful to government policies regarding sedition, civil liberties, immigration and asylum seekers – as terroristic as these policies may seem. In *Commentaries on Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1987) argues that 'spectating populations must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else seems

rather acceptable, in any case more rational and democratic.'

Conclusion

Schapelle Corby is a visual event that is underwritten by the broad brushstrokes of both western coalition and Australian domestic political compliance. At the same time, as Eisenstein (2002: 79) has noted, 'September 11 has not changed *everything*. It has just made clear how much context and perspective and location matter.' Whilst the case foregrounds the visual as a technology of cultural change, the Schapelle Corby event is a powerful testament not to the 'truth', but to the 'how' or the ongoing strategic operations of a national imaginary's (inter)national past and future. As Heidegger (1992: 19) has observed, 'only the how can be repeated. The past ... is anything but what is past.' From the beach girl, to the weeping woman, to the vulnerable target of foreign forces, Schapelle consolidates an ethnocen-

tric and gendered version of post-national Australian identity, defined and maintained through discourses of vulnerability, terror, xenophobia and paranoid nationalism (Understanding these aspects of the visual event may go some way toward explaining the public apathy toward Hicks, Habib and the Bali 9). Thus one can only attend to the historical significance and weight at work in the visual event in terms of both 'the how' and 'the now', or, as this paper has framed them, persistence and change. The persistence of earlier forms of national self-definition reinstalls the representational currency of Anglicised femininity within the visual articulation of range of perceived physical and ideological threats. When I think of that banner with 'Boycott Bali' painted across it, I know that I am participating in a network of international events, and I know also that there are more episodes to come. Seeing Schapelle is seeing culture; in terms of what images and events repeat and in terms of their discursive location in a political present.

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