

## **Graham Huggan**

“Threatened Worlds, Famous Faces”

Graham Huggan (Leeds Metropolitan University, UK)

Abstract:

Celebrities, argues Graeme Turner, “are called upon to carry meaning in situations far beyond what can reasonably be seen to be their professional expertise, and to audiences far exceeding those who might be supposed to be interested in the products they represent.” One field within which this surplus meaning is evident in contemporary western societies is conservation. Celebrities have long been important in supporting this particular branch of the global conscience industry. Such celebrity figures are morally ambivalent. They are not just empty ethical vessels at the service of promotion (e.g. through the mediating role of the celebrity spokesperson or figurehead), but nor are they unlikely culture heroes whose emotional commitment provides a failsafe means of carrying ethical issues to the world (Turner). More likely to be admired than conservationist celebrities, whose ideological inconstancy and susceptibility to media manipulation are well documented, are celebrity conservationists, whose emotional commitment is matched by their proven professional expertise. This paper compares two very different kinds of celebrity conservationist, both controversial, the late Steve Irwin (Australia) and David Suzuki (Canada), looking at issues of claimed expertise and ethical license, and gauging their effectiveness in winning support for the global conservationist cause.

In particular, my presentation at TransCan Two will focus on the prominent Canadian scientist/journalist/activist David Suzuki, who has been described as one of the greatest environmentalists of his age. An anti-celebrity celebrity, Suzuki has become a household figure for his outspoken views on the perils of genetic engineering, the misguidedness of economic development and, perhaps above all, the recklessness of Western patterns of over-consumption in a chronically depleted world. I will make a case for Suzuki as celebrity conservationist within the context of what John Brockman, drawing on Snow's 'Two Cultures' theory, calls a popularized 'Third Culture': 'those scientists and other thinkers in the empirical world who, through their work and expository writing, are taking the place of the traditional intellectual in rendering visible the meanings of our lives, redefining who and what we are' (Brockman 1995). I will also discuss the view that Suzuki's success is indicative of the move toward a 'new, embodied intellectual authority [that] has embraced intellectual figures from a variety of fields ranging from the sciences to the social sciences to the arts': an authority that attests to 'the increasingly mediatized nature of the public sphere' (Lewis 2001).

What follows is the introductory part of the chapter where the discussion of Suzuki will be a part of.

### ***CROCODILE TEARS: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF STEVE IRWIN***

#### ***Introduction***

It was almost inevitable that he would die under bizarre circumstances, and that an

animal would be responsible for his death. Not a crocodile, though. On Monday September 4<sup>th</sup> 2006, the massively popular Australian naturalist Steve Irwin, aka Discovery Channel's 'Crocodile Hunter', was killed by a stingray --a species, unlike many of those Irwin had made his name for confronting, hardly known for its aggression-- while shooting film just off Port Douglas for his daughter Bindi's own TV nature show. Worldwide media coverage immediately followed, not all of it adulatory. The Manchester *Guardian* allowed itself to shed a crocodile tear or two: 'Reports of the Australian wildlife television presenter Steve Irwin's death', wrote its columnist Mark Bristow, 'have long been either exaggerated or expected. On previous occasions, Irwin, known worldwide for his Discovery Channel programmes, [had] allegedly [been] killed by a black mamba and a komodo dragon. This time, sadly, the reports were true --the barb from a stingray punching into his heart in what most experts regard as a freak accident' (quoted in Shears 2006: 17). Still less impressed was the *Washington Post*, which reported how Irwin had 'spent much of his life not just tempting fate but petting it, riding its back and swinging it by the tail'; and which concluded, archly, that 'it was a freaky ... but perhaps morbidly fitting' way to go (quoted in Shears 2006: 17). Not to be outdone, Germaine Greer, always good for a sermon on such occasions, chipped in with a thoroughly nasty obituary, also published in the *Guardian*. 'What Irwin failed to understand', she wrote sanctimoniously,

was that animals need space. The one lesson any conservationist must labour to drive home is that habitat loss is the principal cause of species loss. There was no habitat, no matter how fragile or finely balanced, that Irwin hesitated to barge into, trumpeting his wonder and amazement to the skies. There was not an animal he was not prepared to manhandle. Every creature he brandished at the camera was in distress. Every snake badgered by Irwin was at a huge disadvantage, with only a

single possible reaction to its terrifying situation, which was to strike.

(Quoted in Shears 2006: 57)

Notwithstanding, most popular responses to Irwin's death were reverential, even by celebrity standards. 'Such global shock and sadness comes only rarely', intoned Richard Shears in his gushing biography, *Wildlife Warrior*, placing Irwin's death on a par with Princess Diana's and J.F. Kennedy's, and likening the emotional response it elicited to that surrounding the terrorist attacks in Bali and New York (Shears 2006: 12). Later, the funeral service, held at the family-franchised Australia Zoo, would bring distraught visitors from all over the world to listen to Bindi pledge to take over the Irwin Empire. Kevin Costner danced in attendance, and Justin Timberlake piped up to say that he had only spent a day with the Irwins, but it had been a day he would never forget. John Howard, lump in throat, paid fulsome tribute to another all-Australian hero. As the truck bearing Steve's body drove away, John Williamson sang 'Hey True Blue, don't say you've gone, say you've knocked off for a smoko and you'll be back later on'. Zoo staff then laid out flowers spelling out the Irwin catch-cry, 'Crikey', and the service/circus was complete (Shears 2006: 204).

It was a bizarre end in several ways, then, but certainly one fitting for a celebrity. In Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner and David Marshall's terms, we might describe the circumstances surrounding Irwin's death as a 'flashpoint' event of the kind that occurs when 'a particular celebrity completely dominates media coverage, producing an excessively focused global public' (Turner *et al.* 2000: 6). Flashpoint events are characterised by the disproportionate relationship between the event itself and its emotional impact on the public, and by an unexpected interruption in the hitherto careful media management of the celebrity persona that apparently discloses an intimate connection between him, or her, and people's everyday lives (Turner *et al.*

2000: 3). Death, of course, is the best guarantor of this interruptive process. Nothing becomes a celebrity in his life like the leaving it. As Elisabeth Bronfen puts it, ‘the corpse of a celebrity mirrors the lethal voyeurism of our culture’; or, shifting the theoretical register slightly, ‘in our celebration of narratives of catastrophe, the antagonism which above all else is repressed is that of facing the unresolvable yet unavoidable alterity [that] death represents for all of us’ (Bronfen 2001: 133, 130). What Irwin’s death represented, and what lessons his life contained, are the main subjects of this essay. The more particular idea I wish to explore, though, is that Irwin’s celebrity status functions as a link between three interconnected discursive strands that surround and help explain his media persona. As I will demonstrate, these strands, which pertain --in loose terms-- to the lone adventure hero, the socially conscious conservationist, and the community-oriented Australian family man, are themselves enmeshed in further discursive networks of ‘export’ nationalism, ecological endangerment and survival, and the untimely return, mediated through a white-Australian form of ‘postcolonial melancholia’ (Gilroy 2003), of the colonial repressed.

### ***Celebrities and conservationists***

Four basic observations about celebrities can be made as a way of getting things started. First, celebrities are discursively produced through media and other communications networks; second, they are symptomatic of the blurring of private and public spaces in everyday social life; third, they are brand names and marketing tools as well as cultural icons and model identities; fourth, they are both targets of and vehicles for a wide variety of cultural and ideological debates (see Turner *et al.* 2000: 12-13; also Marshall 1997). To these preliminary observations, drawn mainly from Turner, Bonner and Marshall’s work, we might add a fifth: namely, that celebrities are

both less important and more important than they seem to be. Another way of saying this is that they carry surplus meaning in relation to the various contexts within which their identities are produced, disseminated and consumed as highly mobile cultural commodities; or as Turner *et al.* put it: ‘Celebrities are called upon (and do) carry meaning in situations far beyond what can reasonably be seen to be their professional expertise and to audiences far exceeding those who might be supposed to be interested in the products they represent’ (Turner *et al.* 2000: 164).

One field within which this surplus meaning is evident in contemporary western societies is *conservation*. Celebrities have long been important in supporting this particular branch of the contemporary global conscience industry. Such celebrity figures, like celebrities in general, are morally ambivalent. They are not just empty ethical vessels at the service of promotion (e.g. through the mediating role of the celebrity figurehead or spokesperson); but nor are they unlikely culture heroes whose emotional commitment provides a failsafe means of carrying ethical issues to the world (Turner *et al.* 2000: 165). More likely to be admired than *conservationist celebrities*, whose ideological inconstancy and susceptibility to media manipulation are well documented, are *celebrity conservationists*, whose emotional commitment is matched by their proven professional expertise. The formula of the celebrity conservationist as television presenter is a proven winner, with ‘old hands’ like David Attenborough and, particularly, David Bellamy providing a bankable mixture of the thoughtfully mature and the thoughtlessly maverick that reflects the perceived eccentricities of their subject while falling just short of the expectations of that other attractive popular-science topos, the naturalist as buffoon (see Holland and Huggan 1998, esp. Ch. 2; also Huggan 2004).

A rather different kind of celebrity conservationist, necessarily younger, is the *adventurer*. As the American anthropologist Luis Vivanco asserts, ‘in an age in which adventure travel and support for nature conservation appear to combine in ecotourism and magazines featuring ‘extreme content’ like *Outside* and *National Geographic Magazine*, it is productive to consider the ways in which environmentalism itself relies on and draws from the imaginations and practices of adventure’ (Vivanco 2004: 10). As adventure conservationism blurs the line between the celebrity conservationist and the conservationist celebrity, it’s no coincidence to find that Russell Mittermeier, the president of Conservation International, has admitted to a Tarzan fixation, and that its vice-chair is Harrison Ford, alias Indiana Jones (Vivanco 2004: 10). Vivanco attributes the huge success of Steve Irwin’s *Crocodile Hunter* series to the ways in which it projects the fantasy world of adventure conservationism while remaining more or less faithful to the realist techniques of documentary nature film. This formula, while commercially successful, has its obvious drawbacks, not least the tendency to emphasise ‘the fantasy spectacle of adventure over the hard work of collaborative social and political action in actual historical contexts of political-economic inequality and conflict’ (Vivanco 2004: 7; see also Huggan 2004 and section 3 below). This deliberate work of decontextualisation is backed up by the antics of the celebrity lead, one of whose functions is to short-circuit the information overload normally associated with educational documentary film (Turner *et al.* 2000: 166). After all, as Turner, Bonner and Marshall argue: ‘The individual celebrity persona provides a powerful condensation of meaning which can be attached to commodities and issues, [while] celebrities can act as prisms through which social complexity is brought back to the human level’ (Turner *et al.* 2000: 166). The apparent aim of *Crocodile Hunter* is more radical: to eradicate social complexity altogether in favour of creating the illusion of a direct and deliberately fantasised/

infantilised one-on-one confrontation with the wild. This staged confrontation illustrates a double paradox that underlies the relationship between adventure and conservationism: that of threatening threatened animals, where humans both produce and participate in the scenario of endangerment; and that of self-consciously 'interfering' with the wild in order to argue that it be left intact. This paradox also obtains in other commercialised representations of endangered animals that retail clichés about 'teeming life' on a 'shrinking planet' or, performing a natural version of what James Clifford calls 'salvage ethnography' (Clifford 1988), that rescue 'vanishing' wildlife for the camera before their time, and the planet's, has run out (see Holland and Huggan 1998; also Wilson 1992).

The relationship between adventure and conservationism also brings to light some of the ideological contradictions built in to the idea of conservation itself. The first and most obvious contradiction is that conservation is staunchly anthropocentric, placing human beings very much at the centre of their own responsibly altered world. The second is that conservation is historically complicit with the dominating practices of colonialism, and might itself be seen as a form of colonialism in so far as it tends to serve First World political and economic interests, or to provide the rationale for a top-down management of environmental resources in which local social concerns are strategically overlooked (see, for example, Adams and Mulligan 2003; also Grove 1995). An extreme view of this is that western conservationist projects knowingly or inadvertently participate in the 'ongoing colonization of the natural world by the market' (Langton 2003: 79), which brings me to the third contradiction of conservationism: that, as an instrument of contemporary global capitalism, its protectionist strategies may pose a further threat to those already disadvantaged within the capitalist world system, e.g. by blocking access to traditional cultural

practices which might be seen as conservationist in their own right (Langton 2003; see also Stevens 1997).

This is a very broad picture of a movement that is far from uniform or unified, but as William Adams and Martin Mulligan among others have argued, conservationism, in adjusting itself to the needs of the late-modern, late-capitalist era, might well be seen as being in need of saving itself from itself. As Adams and Mulligan argue, ‘the global discourse on conservation, dominated as it is by people and organizations from nations that benefited most from colonialism, has sometimes been used to justify new forms of colonization’ (Adams and Mulligan 2003: 9). Thus, while it is true that ‘many conservationists have worked hard to adept their agendas to discourses about dismantling the colonial legacy ... [conservation action] has rarely been [as] sensitive [as it might be] to local human needs and a diversity of world views’ (Adams and Mulligan 2003: 9). In addition, conservation and development ‘have become entangled in messy post-colonial transitions’; nowhere more so than in Australia, where an entrenched ‘culture and economy of resource exploitation’ now has to contend with, although is not necessarily challenged by, ‘an ideology of preservationism that resists human-induced change’ (Adams and Mulligan 2003: 7-8; see also Griffiths 1997).

*Crocodile Hunter* can be seen in this context as a colonial fantasy of domination (its American viewers apparently have their own Irwin-as-Tarzan fixation: see Vivanco 2004; also Shears 2006) played out under the postcolonial conditions of a country (Australia) whose cultural, political and economic indebtedness to America is periodically resisted even as it is repeatedly enforced. (It’s interesting to note here that Irwin’s manager John Stainton, the marketing brains behind the *Crocodile Hunter*

series, reacted ecstatically to his marriage to Terri, an American naturalist: 'That he had an American wife meant it was a formula made in heaven', said Stainton, 'It was like when you make up a new formula for a soft drink. I knew from day one' that it was going to be a huge success (quoted in Shears 2006: 96.) I will come back later to Irwin's 'Australianness' and its exchange value on the global (and, more particularly, the American) market; for the moment, I want to concentrate on different aspects of his show as a wide-ranging colonial allegory: an allegory in which the figure of the crocodile, as well as its hunter, is inextricably enmeshed.

### ***Surviving crocodiles***

If Irwin, until recently, was nothing if not a survivor, then so is his principal adversary, the crocodile. One of the ostensible messages of *Crocodile Hunter* is to make a case for Australian crocodile conservation on the grounds that, although it is a conspicuously dangerous wild animal, human fear of it should not lead it to be indiscriminately killed (Shears 2006: 81). Crocodile conservation is necessary on several grounds: it is a listed endangered animal in the region (Index 2 in Australia, Index 1 in other parts of the Asia-Pacific), and despite being the object of indigenous hunting practices, has long outlived humans, surviving for well over a hundred million years (Kelly 2006; see also Guggisberg 1972). While most contemporary palaeontologists take issue with the popular view that modern-day crocodiles' ancestors once walked with the dinosaurs, they are among the world's oldest living creatures, and crocodylians are the only 'ruling reptiles' to have survived the ecological disaster that wiped out around 70% of the species on the planet around 65 million years ago (Kelly 2006: 113-14).

Crocodiles are an evolutionary wonder, but also --in human times-- an atavistic

adversary, and they have spawned numerous myths and legends, many of them fear-based, all over the world (Kelly 2006). In a recent, Freudian reading, Rod Giblett suggests that the human fear of crocodilians (principally crocodiles and alligators) constitutes a 'monstrous uncanny' in which 'the fascinating and the horrific are projected onto, and embodied in, an orally sadistic monster' (Giblett 2006: 300). Moreover, in Freud's seminal 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', the crocodile emerges as a figure of the colonial unconscious in so far as the carved wooden crocodiles which appear to come to ghostly life in one of the essay's central anecdotes are colonial artefacts --a symptom, as Freud sees it, of the return of the (British) colonial repressed (Giblett 2006: 302-5, 310). While Giblett endorses Freud's reading, he is less impressed with another version of the crocodilian colonial allegory, the Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood's emotionally charged account of her near-death encounter with a crocodile in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, which she incorporates into both a 'masculinist monster myth' of violent predation and a postlapsarian version of the Australian wetlands in which the serpent-crocodile, in its archetypal role as 'boundary inhabitant', almost succeeds in dragging its prey from one element into another, from the safety of pastoral land to the life-threatening recesses of the primeval swamp (Giblett 2006; Plumwood 2000). Plumwood's most audacious move, though, is to use a reading of the New Guinean writer Vincent Eri's 1970 novel *The Crocodile* to assimilate her experiences to a broad-based colonial allegory in which the eponymous crocodile becomes a 'metaphor for the relationship between colonised indigenous culture and colonising Western culture' (Plumwood 2000: 138, also quoted in Giblett 2006: 310). The crocodile in Eri's novel, claims Plumwood, is a 'sort of magician [whose] technique is to steal the Other, the creature of land, away into its world of water where it has complete mastery over it' (Plumwood 2000: 137, also quoted in Giblett 2006: 308). 'If the crocodile-magician-

coloniser can drag you completely into its medium, you have little chance', is Plumwood's reading of the parable, but 'if you can somehow manage to retain a hold on your medium, you may survive' (Plumwood 2000: 138, also quoted in Giblett 2006: 310). As Giblett says, this is a misreading of the novel, but that is not my primary interest here. What I want to explore instead are the connections between the crocodile, the colonial encounter and the figure of indigenous survival, which will lead me to one further, no doubt equally predictable detour before coming back to Irwin's *Crocodile Hunter* as an example of a postcolonial 'crocodile text'. The example I have in mind here is *Crocodile Hunter*'s most obvious predecessor, Peter Faiman's 1986 movie *Crocodile Dundee*, also featuring a by now rather battle-worn Australian celebrity, Paul Hogan, and, much more consciously than Irwin's TV programme, a self-parodying crocodilian allegory of Australia's colonial relation to the US and the wider, globalised world.

### ***Australian beauty***

*Crocodile Dundee* is usually read as 'a metaphor for a genre of representations of Australianness' in a transnational or globalised context where various, mostly hyper-commodified 'discourses of cultural identity compete' (Turner 1995: 114). As Graeme Turner argues, the film is consistent or, perhaps better, consistently inconsistent with the fraught history of American/Australian cultural relations, in which American images of Australia have often acted as a rear-view mirror for 'highly idealised, deeply nostalgic' visions of America itself (Turner 1995: 115). Stephen Crofts has suggested that the film confirms Robert Hughes's anxiety that 'Australia has sold itself as [the] nostalgic picture of a lost frontier, and Americans, yearning after their primal innocence, have bought it' (Hughes, quoted in Crofts 1992: 161). A more positive view is Turner's, which stresses the knowing ways in which the film, anticipating its own reception in America, operates on the assumption that 'Americans

are vulnerable to having their own dreams sold back to them' (Turner 1995: 116).

*Crocodile Dundee* is thus an ironic play on American naivety constructing Australian naivety, although, as Turner confesses, this irony hasn't held back the touristic and cultural-industrial processes, many of them managed in American interests, by which Australian identities have increasingly moved offshore (Turner 1995: 117).

Perhaps the most subtle reading of this complex is Meaghan Morris's 1988 essay 'Tooth and Claw', which reads the film as a 'post-colonial comedy of survival, with remnants of the British, land-taking, appropriative regime (bushmen, Aborigines, Darwinian 'natural' perils, [etc.]) emerging into the 'multinational' cultural space of American-media modernity' (Morris 1988: 244). Describing what she calls as the film's 'primal scene of appropriation', Morris draws attention to its setting in a mythicised Australian outback, which functions as a 'perfect Other to the ultimate urban jungle' that is New York (Morris 1988: 257). The perfection of the outback as a space for the film's own particular enactment of colonialist fantasy is 'its supposed remoteness from cities ... and its 'isolation' in the middle of a monster island --prime territory for Darwinian fantasies of throwbacks, remnants, the (primitive) origin and the (apocalyptic) end of life' (Morris 1988: 257). Ideas about both primitive beginnings and apocalyptic endings are brought together in the film's two major contemporaneous political conflicts: the global conflict surrounding the arms race and nuclear power, and the local conflict surrounding Aboriginal land rights. However, the film, or at least its laconic main character, Mick Dundee, turns a broad back on such 'irrelevant' political issues. The comedy of survival, in this context, engages with western modernity from both a postmodern (anti-traditionalist) and a reactionary perspective (Morris 1988) --one which suggests that survival, in an era that accepts and willingly participates in the media construction of identities, consists in the canny

manipulation of *images* of survival in mass-media outlets, notably TV and popular film.

This brings me back to Steve Irwin and ‘his’ crocodiles, which offer counter-images of survival (heroic invincibility, evolutionary resilience, environmental sustainability) within the postmodern/reactionary context of contemporary TV nature documentary and conservation-oriented wildlife film (Huggan 2004; also Wilson 1992). *Crocodile Hunter*, in several respects, pre-dates its own most obvious generic precursor, staging a kind of millennial battle for backwardness or, not quite the same thing, a lost vision of lost innocence, both of which had already been mocked beyond apparent redemption in Faiman’s film (Morris 1988; also Turner 1995). Then again, like *Crocodile Dundee*, *Crocodile Hunter* might be seen as ironising its own nostalgia in order, in part, to reinstate it (Morris 1988). And, also like the earlier film, Irwin’s TV series disavows (and thereby discloses) Aboriginal social and political issues that are at the heart of its own stated ecological agenda --the concerted attempt to ensure the survival and sustainability of some of the world’s most vulnerable wildlife.

Two counter-examples can be drawn on here that reveal the extent of the problem, both of them centring on the legitimacy or not of killing crocodiles. The first case concerns a recent scheme hatched by the Northern Territory government in conjunction with the local crocodile expert, Grahame Webb, to allow for a limited amount of annual crocodile culling (numbers have now jumped to over 70,000 crocodiles in the territory, the part-result of a hunting ban imposed in the early 70s, although the Australian saltwater crocodile is still filed as ‘vulnerable’, if no longer ‘endangered’, on most world conservation lists: see Shears 2006; also Kelly 2006). The object of the exercise, according to Webb, has been to encourage local

landowners who would otherwise see crocodiles as an eradicable pest to view them as a manageable asset; and, in pursuit of that ambition, the scheme also allows, under a strict quota system, for the controlled harvesting of crocodiles and their eggs each year (Shears 2006: 151). A still more recent suggestion has been for the establishment of a crocodile safari programme in the territory, with a small number of big game hunters from America and Europe being flown in, and an even smaller number of luxury crocodile skins (the hunters' trophies) being shipped out. Irwin, needless to say, was enraged when he heard about this suggestion, and after a vigorous campaign targeting the Federal Environment Minister, Ian Campbell, the latter decided that crocodile safaris, at least for the foreseeable future, would not be allowed (Shears 2006: 151-2).

The second example concerns the Aboriginal activist Marandoo Yanner who, after having been charged with the unlawful killing of a protected species under the Queensland Fauna Act, was later acquitted on the grounds that he was entitled to hunt for crocodiles in the area where his people come from, the High Court of Australia finding that the Fauna Act 'did not prohibit or restrict the appellant, as a native title holder, from hunting or fishing for the crocodiles he took for the purpose of satisfying personal, domestic or non-commercial communal needs' (quoted in Langton 2003: 100). As the Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton, in whose essay this example is given, concludes in terms unlikely to have found favour with Irwin and his followers, although the High Court 'ruling imposed limits on Aboriginal resource rights (that is, for non-commercial uses only), it was a breakthrough in recognizing Aboriginal rights in Australia' (Langton 2003: 100).

It is not my purpose here to debate the rights and wrongs of these two separate

examples, but rather to indicate the dangers of either individual or collective conservationist visions flying in the face of traditional cultural practices and local community rights. If, as I suggested previously, this is one of the lacunae in certain animal-oriented versions of conservationist thinking, it is a gap that yawns crocodile-wide throughout almost the entirety of Irwin's work. (Not that Irwin's own particular conservationist agenda precluded him from working with Aborigines, often on a commercial basis, as in his negotiation with the Gubbi Gubbi people for the right to allow helicopter 'reconnaissance' flights in the Glasshouse Mountains area --a negotiation promptly disputed by other Aboriginal peoples in the region, who contended that they had title to the land, too, but had not been consulted --see Shears 2006.) As Langton puts it, the 'fossilized post-colonial view of native peoples as having mere customary subsistence rights' is in urgent need of being altered, as is the view that 'local' cultural issues are secondary to the 'global' considerations of animal and environmental rights (Langton 2003: 104; see also Griffiths 1997). The celebrity conservationist, in this context, is more likely to back up the mainstream views of the international conservation organizations than to challenge them, and may even be complicit in the unacknowledged forms of 'environmental racism' (Langton 2004) they purvey. Celebrity conservationism, more to the point, becomes the focus for a debate in which the media manipulation of affect --another potential definition of celebrity-- assumes greater importance than the rational consideration of complex issues, and competing discourses of survival are subsumed under the universal category of endangerment: a category ironically trained on the individual figure of the 'wildlife warrior' himself.

As suggested above, one of the discourses of survival under which Irwin's work as celebrity conservationist operates is that of the threat posed to Australian cultural

autonomy by the global (often, American) corporate control of celebrity image rights. What ‘survives’ in Irwin’s work other than a vestigial cultural nationalism driven primarily if not exclusively by offshore corporate concerns? One answer might lie in his appeal as a committed supporter of his local community in Queensland, and as a devoted husband and father to his two children: a genuine family man. Yet this view of Irwin is no less susceptible to ideological manipulation than the discourses of authenticity that surround it. John Howard’s funeral speech is a good example of the way in which authenticity can be recovered for the nation beneath the surface sheen of global celebrity:

My fellow Australians, we gather in this special place that Steve created to celebrate the life of a remarkable man and a remarkable Australian. Steve Irwin touched the heart of millions around the world in a very special way. He did that because he had that quality of being genuine, of being authentic, of being unconditional, of having a great zest for life and throughout his all-too-short life he demonstrated a love for the two things that ought to matter more to us than anything else –his love of his family and his love of his country. He brought to Australians and the world an understanding of nature. He taught children in particular to love and respect all creatures great and small. In everything he did, was direct, he was genuine and oh-so Australian and that is what we loved so much about him. Can I say to you, Terri, to Bob [his father] and to Bob and Bindi [his children] and to all other members of the Irwin family –we grieve with you but we celebrate this remarkable life, this life that projected Australia in such a robust, hopeful way to the rest of the world. And as we share this celebration and we honour this life ... I say to you Terri and the rest of this family, there are 20 million pairs of Australian arms reaching out to embrace you this morning and to express our love and respect for what your beloved Steve in his 44 years gave

to Australia, gave to the creatures of this earth and gave to the world. (Quoted in Shears 2006: 189-190)

Typical of Howard, no opportunity is lost to sing the praises of the nation --7 mentions of Australia or Australians in 18 lines-- while claiming to embrace the different people (or, here, the different creatures) of the world. This almost literal engulfing of the global celebrity by cultural-nationalist sentiment --20 million pairs of arms sound distinctly suffocating-- will provide the last moment in this essay to consider the 'Australianness' of Irwin and the intersection between the commodification of his private persona and his public conservationist work.

### ***Conclusion***

The perhaps unlikely figure I want to deploy here is 'postcolonial melancholia', Paul Gilroy's suggestive term for the near-pathological inability of contemporary Britons to come to grips with the loss of the aggressive forms of national self-pride and international authority that came with the five-century exercise of British imperial power (Gilroy 2003). While Gilroy would probably be the last to say that postcolonial melancholia applies to Australia, a victim of British imperialism as much as a beneficiary of it, I believe it does, and that the ambivalent legacy of White Australia for contemporary Australians functions in a similar way. Furthermore, I think Irwin's work can be seen in terms of the attempted recovery of a fantasised vision of White Australia that is recognised, at the same time, as being irretrievably lost. *Crocodile Hunter*, in other words, belongs to a familiar sub-genre of white salvation narratives in which the historical violence of colonialism is displaced onto contemporary 'survival' confrontations, and the broken relationship between white Australians and the land, sealed over the control and responsible management of natural resources, is restored. (Restored without the need for Aboriginal intervention, it might be added;

indeed, one of the appeals of Irwin's work, and his persona, for a certain category of white Australians and, one presumes, white Americans is the implication that conservation issues presuppose social cooperation and a harmonisation of conflicting interests --a kind of reconciliation without tears.)

What is also interesting in Irwin's case is the deployment of a conservationist vocabulary --endangerment, survival, sustainability-- to uphold a threatened vision of Australia vouchsafed by the figure of the global celebrity: a figure through which the dialectics of durability and ephemerality, the twin poles between which most celebrity lives oscillate, are played out. This mythicised interplay, represented best in the figure of the adventure hero cheating death but then unexpectedly succumbing to it, occludes the historical struggles that give rise to it, turning Irwin into one of his own endangered animals, and ensuring his survival by marking/marketing his death as a hybrid form of celebrity immortalisation and conservationist continuity (with the torch now passed from Steve to Bindi, the media circus has only just begun). This iterable uniqueness (there was no one like Steve, Bindi will be the 'new Steve') is an effect of the power of celebrity, as well as of the inexhaustible capacity of the media to transfer public attention from one commodity to another while ensuring that these commodities, each one uniquely different, are uncannily the same. Lest we should forget Steve, there will be not one, but a whole series of 'new Steves', ensuring that the conservation effort will continue, even if (to co-opt Benjamin belatedly and inaccurately) it is predominantly the aura of the celebrity conservationist that, mechanically reproduced, will be artificially conserved (see Benjamin 1968).

In the UK, where I currently live, there is a new daredevil herpetologist in town, a white Namibian. His name, and the title of the show, might have an oddly familiar ring to them: *Austin Stevens's Adventures*. The last time I caught him he was in hot

pursuit of the world's most dangerous snake, the one rumoured to have killed his close namesake, the black mamba. He survived that experience, of course; time will tell whether he is as successful as was his famous predecessor, Steve Irwin, in doing what all celebrities do best, selling the commodity that is themselves (Turner *et al.* 2000: 12).

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