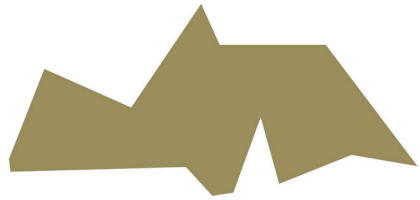


# YELLOW PERIL

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Essay by  
**Ulanda Blair**

## YELLOW PERIL

In the bold cinematic masterpiece that is *Playtime* (1967), director Jacques Tati takes some of the most familiar shared spaces of French post-war society, and renders them strange. A visit to Paris by a group of provincial American tourists forms the film's slim narrative pretext—the Americans arrive in a convoluted cityscape whose supposed modern conveniences conspire to trip, bewilder and ensnare these hapless interlopers. *Playtime*'s Paris is a literal House of Mirrors, a spatially interchangeable landscape that connects an airport terminal with an office lobby, a hotel, a home expo, an apartment complex, and a flashy new restaurant, all in one dizzying continuum. A running joke in the film is that the tourists never actually arrive in the French capital, but rather they spend their visit amiably negotiating the hypermodern simulacra of Paris. The 'real' or authentic city, if such a thing can ever be experienced, is sublimated by the signs and representations of Paris (an effect that was partially achieved through Tati's construction of a 15,000 square-metre film-set replica on the outskirts of Paris).

With its emphasis on simulation, globalisation and the touristic gaze, *Playtime* makes an instructive introduction to artist Eugenia Lim's latest video work *Yellow Peril* (2015), which was filmed at the historical theme park of Sovereign Hill, a 'living history' museum that depicts life on the Ballarat goldfields in the 1850's. *Yellow Peril* borrows from many of *Playtime*'s aesthetic tropes in order to explore the nuances of Australian nationalism, and to question Australia's capacity to facilitate and resist the powers of globalisation. Specifically, the work navigates the fraught historical, political, economic and social dynamic between Australia and China, reminding us that whether it is a fear of immigrants, a fascination with the exotic or something in between, Australia has had a long and deeply ambivalent relationship to Chinese settlement.

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*Yellow Peril* opens with a graceful pan across Sovereign Hill's dusty and deserted landscape. The camera settles on a bright and shiny vista lined with faux 1850's shopfronts, their hand-painted signs reading 'New York Bakery', 'Glasgow Saddlery', 'United States Hotel' and 'Soho Works' all evidence of the international capital present in the Victorian goldfields early-on. The viewer's eye is soon drawn to a cast of anachronistic 'readymade' characters gathering in the street – iPhone-wielding tourists mingling with Sovereign Hill's own period-actors. A curious time-travelling flâneur dressed in a gold Mao suit simultaneously emerges from deep within the frame. Performed by the artist herself, this ghost from the future reinterprets Tseng Kwong Chi's ironic *East Meets West* (1979-1989) photographic series, whereby Tseng's self-constructed persona as an "inquisitive traveller and ambiguous ambassador" satirised relations between the United States and its emerging rival, China.

Indeed *Yellow Peril*'s ambiguous 'Ambassador' activates a chronological jump or temporal void in the work, which serves to amplify the tension between past and present, reality and fiction. The intermeshing of different time-periods confuses the linear clock-time inscribed within the Sovereign Hill experience, whose own history lessons are tethered to concepts of progress and chronological succession. Like narrative film, Sovereign Hill depends on its audience's suspension of disbelief in order to function—the living history museum is extolled as a 'time capsule' contrived to take us 'out of time.' Unpicking this illusion of temporal wholeness, *Yellow Peril* also throws the ideological underpinnings of Australia's whitewashed history into question.

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The spatial rupture mobilised within *Yellow Peril* is another ideologically destabilising tactic. The constant overlapping of visual and aural information between the foreground and background scenes in the video commands multiple sources of attention. The viewer, lacking the direction usually provided by narrative filmmaking, is forced to actively pull focus in often-cacophonous scenes, just as in real life. In this way, *Yellow Peril* draws attention to the many conflicting, polyphonic histories happening in the world at any one time.

Presented beside the *Yellow Peril* video are two black-and-white photographic images digitally printed onto folded gold emergency blankets, themselves spectral objects loaded with mysterious metaphors. The first image, *New Australians (Yellow Peril, 1980/2015)*, is a snapshot of the artist's parents taken at City Square soon after their arrival in Melbourne. The young Chinese-Singaporean couple look hopeful as they stand before *Vault* (1980), Ron Robertson-Swann's much-maligned public sculpture better known as "yellow peril." Considered alongside the video, one is struck not only by the stockade-like quality of Robertson-Swann's sculpture (and, by extension, its formal association with the Eureka Rebellion of 1854), but also by its residual power as a symbol of invasion. Even as the Lim couple stand as the embodiment of optimism in their newly adopted country, the spectre of resentment and fear activated by the sculpture's racist moniker hangs over the scene.

The second image, *New Australians (Welcome Stranger, 1869/2015)* features a Victorian-style portrait of *Yellow Peril's* Ambassador holding the Welcome Stranger nugget. The practice of prospecting is etymologically linked to ideas of anticipation and expectation—to a linear conception of time—and yet the Ambassador's portrait with the gold

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nugget here suggests a return of the repressed. Read in relation to contemporary xenophobic anxieties about an 'Asian invasion' of the Australian property and resources market, this image of Chinese wealth achieved off the Australian land carries a doubly sinister edge.

It could be suggested that artists are often our best historians of the present because they are at one and yet out of sync with their time. Unlike historians, who feel compelled to try to explain why the present had to evolve in exactly the way it did from what came before it, artists trade in making the lived elements of the present appear to be as unnatural, as inexplicable, as possible. To this end, the *Yellow Peril* installation harnesses the visual binary of real/simulation to reveal what Homi K. Bhabha regards as the postcolonial condition – simulation and realism, the global and the local, are proven to be contemporaneous and extant within each other's space. The textual struggle within *Yellow Peril* transcends the boundaries of the visual to embody the tensions of competing global and local cultural identities.

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