Foreword

The closing years of the twentieth century are witnessing a radical re-orientation of thought in the human sciences which defies conventional disciplinary boundaries and demands a new ‘turning’: away from the rationalising modes of modernity and towards a different grasp of the nature of knowing itself. In Marcia Langton’s essay, themes drawn from anthropology, politics and philosophy are intertwined with a clear and unequivocal demand for practices which will transform the dominant modes of representation of Aboriginality and hence of Australian life itself.

The power of visual media as a means of knowledge–creation is only hesitantly grasped by many in public life, especially in Australia. Today’s most influential scholars and intellectuals are perhaps the last generation to grow up in a literacy-dominated culture. For many, film and television are trivial and hardly worth attention, peripheral to the valuable aspects of cultural and social reality, to do with the masses, debased, irrelevant. Not watching television, and seeing only highly selected movies from the ‘art’ circuit, stands for some as a marker of distinction. But, from the viewpoint of the emergent visual-aural culture of the twenty-first century, ‘what’s on’ creates the context for what is known and hence finally for what ‘is’.

While the concept of the post-colonial has become fashionable of late, Marcia Langton’s insistence on an anti-colonial perspective changes the usual terrain. An anti-colonial stance requires above all a practical commitment to the political consequences of representation. Anti-colonialism requires a rupture and a positive awareness of the way colonial representation has shaped, and misshaped, reality for coloniser and colonised alike.

Aboriginal life in Australia has provided a constant source of fascination for the ethnographic gaze; not only the gazes of ‘sciences’,
of course, but that popular view so embedded in a colonial consciousness as to appear completely natural. The body, spirit, philosophy and aesthetics of Aboriginal Australia were imperceptible within the common construction of ‘Otherness’, of a primal primitive world both challenging and seductive. Aboriginal people themselves have created new discursive strategies and seized upon the spaces of representation opened up by the fading of the colonial imagination. All this, and much more, is documented in the following text. Yet it is presented here always within a context of practice and action, underwritten by the urgent need for a new dialogue or polyphony between film and video-makers of all kinds, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, artist and populist, in the context of a deliberate act of mental decolonisation.

Marcia’s essay is critique in the best sense of the term. Critique is critical, not just in the sense of being alert to faults and failings, but in the deeper sense of being centrally important to a cultural agenda within which meaning can be made and knowledge sought anew. The edges and boundaries move to the centre; marginal places and practices develop into the fields of greatest cultural importance. What happens in distant Yuendumu around the VCR raises the question of the Aboriginal absence in mainstream television and film in the cities. There is no doubt that a long overdue re-evaluation of representational practice has been taking place in all sectors of the Australian media: this essay explains why this has been necessary and points to major strategies whereby a meaningful form of anti-colonial representation can be affirmed as a powerful source of creative energy in contemporary film-making and in cultural life more generally.

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**Introduction**

**An attempt to develop an anti-colonial cultural critique**

This essay is about the politics of representation. It should be read as a beginning to what I hope will become an extended debate on the need for an anti-colonialist cultural criticism of representation and visual artforms in a number of fields: film- and videomaking, television, the visual arts, cultural criticism, anthropology, film and arts administration and government policy.

My purpose is to ask questions about representation of Aborigines in an iterative mode, exploring and revisiting arguments to do with ways of knowing. Rather than making prescriptions, I am trying to move boundaries and undo the restrictions which make it so difficult for any of us to speak.

The approach involves an interrogation of texts as products of our cultures, particularly in film. I have tried to make accessible a body of theory to explain my own stance. But if the particular theoretical point is not communicated clearly, I hope the case studies will illustrate what I am suggesting.

I am attempting to find ways to talk to a wider group of people about cultural criticism in the fraught area of Aboriginal arts. Nothing here should be read as an attack on particular persons or films. Rather, it should be read as a critique, particularly of the colonising imperative in Australian art and film.

The essay is more about representation and the Aboriginal subject than it is about filmmaking. I believe at the present time, it is necessary for me to approach the request from the Australian Film Commission in this way.

I hope my approach will make it possible and less difficult for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, including film- and
videomakers, to say and do what they would like to say and do. Freedom in the world of film and the arts can only thrive if there is also a strong critique, and in relation to Aboriginal matters, if the critique is anti-colonialist.

Can we ever decolonise Australian institutions? Can we decolonise our minds? Probably not. But we can try to find ways to undermine the colonial hegemony.

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The views expressed in the essay are my own.

Marcia Langton,

Section One: Aboriginal Film and Video

The conditions of production and interventions

Observers have commented often on the extraordinary amount of time and resources that Aboriginal people devote to the arts and religious ceremonies. Visual and oral expressions have been very elaborate in Aboriginal societies in the social sense. Multilingualism, linguistic devices and codes, oral, dance and musical tradition and the visual arts were more elaborate than the material culture used in daily domestic life such as for hunting, gathering and preparing food, shelter and apparel. Before the British invasion there were approximately two hundred distinct Aboriginal languages. There are now about fifty surviving.

The enormous output of visual art, film, video, music and performing arts currently produced by Aboriginal people is a modern development of the great value they have traditionally placed on the visual and oral arts. The audiences for these artforms are Aboriginal communities, the wider Australian public, and there is an increasing international interest and demand.

Although there has been a rapid commodification of Aboriginal artforms, much of it remains uncommodified and subject to traditional Aboriginal social rules. The dynamics of the marketplace have created new problems in response to which Aboriginal people have sought new solutions.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Aboriginal response to racist representation, especially in the large urban centres, was to demand control of representation. These demands for control, and for funding of community-controlled media, have been expressed at every major film and media conference during the last twenty years. But demands and strategies for controlling representation do
not by themselves work to produce a better representation of Aboriginal people.

It is clearly unrealistic for Aboriginal people to expect that others will stop portraying us in photographs, films, on television, in newspapers, literature and so on. Increasingly, non-Aboriginal people want to make personal rehabilitative statements about the Aboriginal ‘problem’ and to consume and reconsume the ‘primitive’.

Rather than demanding an impossibility, it would be more useful to identify those points where it is possible to control the means of production and to make our own self-representations.

To demand complete control of all representation, as some Aboriginal people naively do, is to demand censorship, to deny the communication which none of us can prevent.

One of the important interventions is the act of self-representation itself and the power of aesthetic and intellectual statements. Among the better known Aboriginal people in the visual arts are Michael Nelson Jarakarra, Gordon Bennett, Trevor Nickolls, Rover Thomas, Jimmy Pike, Fiona Foley, Ron Hurley, Sally Morgan, Pansy Napangarti and Emily Nkwarreye. In music, Yothu Yindi, Archie Roach, Roger Knox, the Mills Sisters, Kev Carmody and Coloured Stone are all well known, and some are world famous.

In film and video, Tracey Moffatt, Michael Riley and Essie Coffey have shown their works nationally and internationally. Among other Aboriginal film- and videomakers, Eric Renshaw, Wayne Barker, Rhonda Barker, Coral Edwards, Destiny Deacon, Bruce McGuinness, Brian Syron, have all contributed to a now sizeable body of production.

Each of these artists has made intellectual and aesthetic interventions which change the way Aboriginal people are perceived. Much of their representation is radically different from the usual images of Aborigines. There are also many other skilled Aboriginal people who have participated in co-productions such as Gerry Bostock (Lousy Little Sixpence) and Robert Bropho (Munda Nyuringi).

The community of Borrooloola co-produced Two Laws, while the Waruluurlangu Artists Co-operative and the Yuendumu community recently participated in the production of the Jarsiwarnpa in the Blood Brothers series, to be broadcast on SBS TV. The specifics of the last example of a co-production are discussed in Section Five, providing a case study of an important intervention in the politics of Aboriginal representation.

The late Eric Michaels, the American anthropologist who studied Warlipiri visual representations in Central Australia from 1982 to 1988, argued:

...the sorry fact is that media producers are generally unconcerned with what interpretations a minority group with little economic or political power will make. However, if we provide an experimental opportunity for such people to become their own producers, and observe how they organise production to create culturally useful meaning, much about their expectations can be clarified. (1984:26)

‘Settled’ and ‘remote’: individuals and communities

Aboriginal cultures are extremely diverse and pluralistic. There is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community. There are regions which can be characterised, however, with reference to history, politics, culture and demography. The approach I have used in this discussion recognises two broad regions.

The first region is ‘settled’ Australia, stretching from Cairns around to Perth in a broad arc. This area is where most provincial towns and all the major cities and institutions are located, and where a myriad of small Aboriginal communities and populations reside
with a range of histories and cultures. The impact of the particular frontiers in this arc and the outcomes are complex and diverse.

The second region is 'remote' Australia where most of the tradition-oriented Aboriginal cultures are located. They likewise have responded to particular frontiers and now contend with various types of Australian settlement.

In a very general sense, the film and video productions by Aboriginal people in these two regions are quite different. They are grounded in different cultural bases, histories and socio-political conditions.

The historical effect of the policies and administration of Aboriginal affairs in these two regions has also been quite different. British colonisation began in 1788 in Sydney, but the frontier had not reached parts of northern Australia till the 1930s. Consequently, the policies of control, including 'protection' and 'assimilation', were administered for a longer period, more intensively, and with more destructive results in settled Australia.

One of the effects of these policies, and one of the intentions, was the targeting of the Aboriginal individual. In settled Australia, social-engineering thinking, which underpinned the 'assimilation' policy, sought to shape a new sanitised Aborigine according to certain Anglo-Australian cultural and political dictates.

In contrast, the notion of community arose out of the administration of Aboriginal people in remote and rural areas. The 'transitional' policies of segregation and incarceration which pre-dated and survived the 'assimilation' policies, were directed at communities. These were institutions, rather like the hamlets in the military resettlement scheme during the Vietnam war, where people were sent to be 'pacified'.

In settled Australia today, Aboriginal communities are discrete residential villages such as, Jerrinjah, south of Sydney, whereas in remote Australia, Aboriginal communities such as Yuendumu are more than residential areas. These remote communities are also administrative centres for dispersed Aboriginal groups residing in homeland centres, and for highly mobile populations. Many originated as missions and government settlements and have been redesigned by Aboriginal people since the 1970s to maintain culture and possession of land. The aim is to survive as distinctive social and cultural entities.

Productions authored by individuals, whether in film, video or art, are to some extent typical of Aboriginal people in settled Australia. In Section Three, I have presented several case studies to illustrate some of the features of individually authored, as opposed to community authored film- and videomaking. This has allowed me to arrange a number of theoretical and strategical arguments, though there is some artifice in this approach.

I could have discussed a community production from settled Australia such as We Come From the Land produced by the Jerrinjah community. Instead, I have chosen highly individualistic Aboriginal filmmakers and artists in settled Australia to discuss their self-representation, artistic interventions and interrogations.

The films of urban Aboriginal filmmakers are unlikely to be distributed on video to remote Aboriginal communities, although they might be shown on television during Aboriginal programming.

We know very little about the cultural considerations of Aboriginal involvement in video, film and television production in urban and rural Australia. In a Filmsviews interview, David Noakes explained that he gradually came in contact with Aboriginal people and began teaching video to them. He worked on Munda Nyaringu (1983), a film co-produced by Robert Bropho, Jan Roberts and Martha Ansara and Milliya Rumara/Brand New Day, which he co-produced and co-directed with Bryan McLellan and an Aboriginal
crew. Commenting on his reaction to the cultural gulf, Noakes said:

That film was about fringe-dwellers, and so I again came into contact with aboriginal people and culture, and Aboriginal methods of decision-making...and also with the problems of making films with people who are not only living in difficult circumstances but with big cultural differences. It is not easy when one culture is trying to document another, and using a language which is foreign to that culture. And, for people living in Western Australia, there is so much left over from times gone past: it is within their living memory that aboriginal people were shot, so it's a big emotional issue for them. *Munda Nyuringi* was quite an eye-opener, and I felt upset that the film didn't have more money so that it could be shot over a longer period of time, with more consultation and more freedom of movement for the filmmakers and for the Aboriginal people in the film...

That film [*Millya Rumarr/Band New Day*] again brought us into contact with Aboriginal people, and this time we ended up going north into the Kimberleys to visit the areas that some of the aboriginal performers came from. And that was another eye-opener, because in our naivety we were asking people "Well, what's this dance about?" It's a ludicrous thing to ask when you understand the context, and I suddenly realised that I could make one whole film about one dance, and that realisation was about the richness of the oral tradition. (134: 34-36)

Traditional Aboriginal peoples in remote Australia have different and distinctive cultural and critical backgrounds. Their response to Moffatt's *Night Cries* or even Bruce Beresford's *The Fringe Dwellers* would be quite different from those of the urban audiences who share something of the history and myth-making involved in each of these films.

The conditions of production and transmission in remote communities are also significantly different. Much of the production in remote Australia is the work of community groups. The luxury of 16mm or 35mm film, preferred for its high production values, is simply not an option because of cost, technological, storage and maintenance limitations in Aboriginal communities. However, remote Aboriginal people have their own production values, distinct aesthetics and cultural concerns.

Yuendumu, in remote Australia, is the best-documented case of community production and co-production based on the work of Eric Michaels and the Warlpiri Media Association. The literature allows an examination of the concerns of traditional Aboriginal people in maintaining their culture, autonomy and self-representation through technological and other interventions, on a community basis.

In Yuendumu and other remote communities, the social meanings of the Aboriginal relationship with land, of totemic references and so on, have emotional, affective and aesthetic content. These inform the style and sociality of community video production for their own television services. A significant feature of that production in traditional groups has to do with the involvement of those people who have the authority to produce the image or tell the story. Aboriginal Law governs video production in much the same way as in any other arena of life.

By extrapolation, some of the points made in the discussion of remote Australia are relevant to the values and conditions of community production in films such as *We Come From The Land*.

**Distribution and audiences**

There are a number of audiences to consider when discussing Aboriginal film- and videomaking, and distribution to these audiences takes a number of forms. The production of video material for internal Aboriginal community consumption is now in the thousands of hours. The producers include community-based media associations, regional organisations such as the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), land councils (both statutory and non-statutory) and service delivery associations in health, legal and housing areas.
In urban centres, productions by community organisations are important. Tracey Moffatt gained early experience through the Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) in Redfern, Sydney, which commissioned her to write and direct videos with culturally appropriate information on HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B. These productions were experimental and avant-garde at the time, with distinctive artificial sets, comedic characterisation, computer-generated art and rap music.

Moffatt’s videos were distributed to Aboriginal Medical Services and other organisations throughout Australia, and also to community groups by Aboriginal health workers. Her approach in presenting critical preventative health education to Aboriginal audiences was highly successful, in sharp contrast to the hysterical and possibly even dangerous ‘Grim Reaper’ campaign through mainstream television outlets. This campaign cost many thousands of dollars more than the AMS productions. Moffatt’s videos were later shown at the Australian Film Institute cinema and at a major international AIDS conference. More AMS productions followed, such as Pat Swan’s Where Eagles Dare (1991) on living with people who have been infected with HIV/AIDS.

In urban areas, community groups, including Aboriginal groups, are still pressing for their own community television, to achieve some control of content and to air the many videos that are made for limited audiences.

In remote Australia, community productions are shown on local television transmitters to Aboriginal audiences and are distributed through Aboriginal exchange networks on VHS cassettes. Very occasionally, there are showings at small independent cinemas such as the Australian Film Institute cinema in Sydney. None has been exhibited in commercial cinemas. A few have been shown on ABC and SBS television but none on the three commercial networks.

Local community-based media associations, such as the Warlpiri Media Association at Yuendumu in the Northern Territory and Ernabella TV at Ernabella in South Australia, built their own local low-powered and unlicensed television stations eight years ago.

They have produced hundreds of hours of television, mostly in their own languages, and much of it experimental both in Aboriginal and western terms. These self-representations fill in that empty place which most white filmmakers have circumscribed with their mumbo jumbo, landscape, and fauna pastiches.

A new community-controlled initiative based at Yuendumu is the Tanami Network, an interactive satellite network for video, voice, data and audio communications between a number of communities in central and north Australia.

As a result of the Aboriginal ‘pirate’ television stations at Yuendumu and Ernabella, the Commonwealth Government developed a policy for about eighty communities, known as the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS). The criteria for the eligibility of communities were: a population of two hundred people; that 80% or more of the community was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and that the community was not receiving a national (ABC) television service.

Under the BRACS, communities are provided with satellite receiving equipment to pick up the ABC and the relevant Remote Commercial Television Service (RCTS) plus transmitters to re-broadcast one TV and one radio channel. As well as this equipment, they are given video and sound cassette recorders, tapes, microphones, cameras, tripods and miscellany so that the total package per community in 1988, was worth about $30,000.

The original purpose of the BRACS was to allow remote Aboriginal communities to filter inappropriate ABC programs and insert their own culturally relevant product into the service. The
Department of Education, Employment and Training offers a training component that most Aboriginal communities have insisted is essential. While some communities produce their own programs, others just receive and re-transmit the distant signals. Funding for program production remains a problem and the scheme still lacks provision for permanent employment of Aboriginal media workers.

CAAMA, in Alice Springs, has acquired a special purpose Aboriginal radio licence and is the major shareholder in Imparja Pty Ltd, which holds the RCTS licence for the central Australian satellite zone. It has also established a commercial video and television centre which has produced *Nganampa Anwerne-kwerne* (an Aboriginal magazine format with traditional content in four Aboriginal languages, subtitled in English), and documentaries such as *Satellite Dreaming* and *Benny and the Dreamers*.

These productions have contributed to self-representations by Aborigines which radically expand the limits of what is permissible to say about being Aboriginal in Central Australia. CAAMA's early productions included music video clips of local bands such as Coloured Stone, and a promotional/educational video for the Consumer Affairs Bureau on purchasing second-hand cars entitled *Flash Attack*.

Culturally specific Aboriginal aesthetics are conveyed in these CAAMA programs and other community-based productions such as that from the remote Central Australian media associations at Yuendumu and Ernabella.

Though production of program content and control of radio and television licences are effective strategies for Aboriginal people to intervene in the politics of representation, they are fraught with funding problems. Imparja has failed in some respects because of the commercial nature of its RCTS licence and funding of expensive satellite facilities in a small advertising market which has both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal viewers.

The two other RCTS licenses are required to broadcast a quota of Aboriginal programming as part of their licensing agreements. In 1988, the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Media Association (TAIMA) exerted pressure on the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) to vary the licence conditions of the Queensland RCTS license so as to require the licensee to commission and broadcast more Aboriginal programming of which TAIMA was seeking to produce.

As RCTS and ABC viewers, Aboriginal people in remote Australia are sophisticated in their reading of television:

> It is a little known fact that Aboriginal people across Australia are extremely film literate: from the fifties even very remote communities, reserves and missions commonly had up to three film nights a week in the open or in halls and the like. It is this familiarity with film, and more recently video, that has contributed to a strong awareness of the power of the medium. (Mackinolty and Duff 1987: 9)

They are now demanding representation that is not insulting or offensive. Some solutions are to be found in strategies of intervention, such as the Northern Land Council's protocol for filmmakers on Aboriginal land. (See Appendix).

Entitled *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner in Arnhem Land*, this protocol sets out some of the objections which Aboriginal people have to racist representation.

Just as Aboriginal land is regarded as having no intrinsic value until the arrival of a film crew, Aboriginal people are often similarly regarded as having little use other than as exotic backdrop...many filmmakers seem to have the perception that Aboriginal people are just hanging around under trees, 'on hold', and just waiting to be 'activated' by a documentary crew, or 'scripted in' to a drama. Alternatively, Aboriginal lives are perceived as being largely miserable and impoverished, relieved only by the arrival of another film journalist who will reveal their plight to a suitably shocked world.

Similarly, Aboriginal culture is very often regarded as a resource just sitting there waiting to be tapped. Documentary makers, for example, often
seek to film entirely for the sake of showing ethnographic curiosities to the world, demanding of Aboriginal people what might be entirely inappropriate responses. Almost to a person, filmmakers demand—and expect—Aboriginal participants to behave 'traditionally' in ways that only the lens of a camera seems to understand. The 'take your clothes off, throw on some ochre and look noble' is alive and well among would-be filmmakers on Aboriginal land.

A large number of scripts and treatments that are submitted to the land councils depend on depicting Aboriginal culture as something mysterious: an amalgam of mumbo jumbo and children of nature. For example a recent script proposed a fictitious tribe which ranged from Kaladh’s wetlands to the desert, as well as Kurndijitj men, medicine men, and jiruungas from Central Australia combined with didjiridus from Arnhem Land. The main protagonist, of course, was a sympathetic white female anthropologist divorced whose ten year old son was, of course, 'initiated into the tribe'. Believe it or not, there have been major television presales on the basis of this script. (Mackinolty and Duffy, 1987:9)

The Northern Land Council protocol should not be read as an act of arbitrary censorship. Rather it offers the grounds for negotiating new standards and terms for meaningful dialogue with outside film or video producers. The outcome could be a greater freedom and far less intrusion and inconvenience in Aboriginal communities.

**Aboriginal content on mainstream television**

Aboriginal program content and employment by the commercial television networks has been an issue for many years and, the problem has still not been addressed satisfactorily by the networks.

The national broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, each has an Aboriginal Television Unit. Aboriginal training programs, and employment policies to encourage and support Aboriginal involvement. In recent years they have increased their commitment to Aboriginal programming, in which the contribution by Aboriginal staff and trainees is significant. SBS TV was the first to publish guidelines, written by Lester Bostock, for film and television producers.

Eric Willmot, Chairman of the Task Force on Aboriginal and Islander Broadcasting and Communications which published its report, *Out of the Silent Land* (1984), was a strong proponent of the suggestion that Aboriginal 'content' should be embedded in general television programming, arguing that it would be relevant not just to Aboriginal people but to all Australians.

There was some discussion at the ABT's Queensland RCTS inquiry regarding the definition of an Aboriginal program. The question was asked whether a program that featured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but was aimed at a general audience, should be considered as Aboriginal programming in order for the licensee to fill the quota of hours. Another debate was about whether or not news or magazine style programs featuring Aboriginal and Islanders should be counted as Aboriginal content. Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Media Association (TAIMA) raised the matter of whether programs had to be made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander producers to be considered as Aboriginal content.

By 1992, Aboriginal and Islander people were still virtually invisible on the three commercial television networks. One network was even broadcasting a drama series featuring a European acting in place of the original Aboriginal character, Bony, from the novels of Arthur Upfield. This avoided two possibilities: casting an Aboriginal in a leading role or, as was initially proposed, "painting up" a white actor. This series, *Bony*, is more humiliating than the representation of serious Aboriginal political issues as 'trouble' being caused by 'drunken Aboriginal people' with gratuitous footage of wine flagons.

A new and welcome twist to the embedding argument was the appointment of Stan Grant, an Aboriginal journalist, to the position of anchor on *Real Life*. Grant is an accomplished political reporter who formerly worked in the Canberra Press Gallery. His
announcement to a representative of the US fascist movement that he was Aboriginal must have been a novel experience for Network Seven audiences!

Meanwhile, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission (ATSIC), a Commonwealth statutory body, commissions a high budget video magazine entitled *Aboriginal Australia*. The production was until recently contracted out to a non-Aboriginal production house. The style, typical of government information videos, is hardly likely to draw a mass audience. The program is now made by CAAMA which won the contract by tender.

ATSIC distributes this program, gratis, to the commercial networks, among others, with the aim of ensuring that some Aboriginal content reaches mass audiences. However, it is an indication of the problems involved in getting Aboriginal content on commercial television, that most stations which choose to transmit this program schedule it in the periods when the television audience is smallest.

Assimilationist thinking is an underlying theme in both government policy-making and the mainstream media. It is partly responsible for the failure of government to respond adequately to the call by Aboriginal people all over Australia for air rights, and for the delay in developing appropriate licensing regimes for television services controlled by Aboriginal communities.

As always, competition for scarce resources is a significant problem which shapes outcomes. Short-cuts, simplistic solutions such as assimilation, and the failure of poorly devised policies are the stuff of administrative history in Aboriginal affairs and provide valuable lessons in what not to do.

It is the interventions devised by Aboriginal film- and videomakers all over Australia, whether as individuals or community groups, that should become the focus for funding and policy bodies.

I will turn now to a discussion of the politics of Aboriginal representation in film- and videomaking.

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Section Two: The Politics of Aboriginal Representation

The involvement of Aboriginal people in the making of film and video has increased at a such a rate since 1979 that the field can be seen with some hindsight and quantification as a minor social revolution. This was the year when filmmakers Alec Morgan and Martha Ansara handed over directorial control to Essie Coffey, Aboriginal matriarch and country and western singer, in the making of *My Survival as an Aboriginal*.

But as in other revolutions, and other fields of Aboriginal action, critical problems have arisen.

**The need for critical theory: racist representation**

Critics find it difficult to discuss Aboriginal works because of an almost complete absence of critical theory, knowledge of, and sensibility towards Aboriginal film and video production. There are some important exceptions, most of it in specialist literature which is not widely read.

The late Eric Michaels, anthropologist, who documented the work of the Warlpiri Media Association, and Michael Leigh, film archivist, in particular, have broadened our understanding, and a small group of film theorists has ventured into the field. Lalene Jayamanne, a Sri Lankan filmmaker, and E. Ann Kaplan, an American film theorist, have written reviews of Tracey Moffatt’s works and provide an anti-colonial understanding of an Aboriginal woman’s filmmaking. As well, independent film- and videomakers such as Destiny Deacon, Michael Riley, Rhonda Barker and Eric Renshaw have provided an anti-colonial critique through their productions.
But there is no sizeable body of literature which provides an informed, anti-colonial critique of films and videos about Aboriginal people.

History is another problem. In film, as in other media, there is a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people. Michael Leigh estimates that a staggering 6,000 films have been made about Aborigines. The research and critique by the few critical writers is diminished to the size of a family of ants in comparison to the elephant of colonial representation.

The easiest and most ‘natural’ form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible. Indeed, racism can provide a complete and satisfying comprehension of black identity (which is why it persists) and one that is linked to the viewer’s ideological framework (Wallace, 1990: 1)

E. Ann Kaplan noted the initial invisibility of Aboriginal people to visitors from overseas such as herself. This becomes her metaphor for the absence of Aboriginal people from representation: ‘As a foreigner, it has been hard to locate Aborigines on any level, least of all in person. Yet once one becomes aware of their absence, suddenly in a way they are present...’ (Kaplan 1989:13)

Kaplan describes her encounters with Aboriginal people: a quiet Aboriginal family in Mosman visiting a waterhole, a quiet very drunk Aboriginal man trying to obtain service in a shop, and an Aboriginal video producer from Central Australia.

How are we, as strangers, to make sense of any of these contradictory images? We are faced again with the problem of difference, and with how to conceptualize it. How can I enter or approach the culture of the Aborigines, as a white Anglo-Celt who has lived long in North America? Why do I want to? Wouldn’t it be better to leave them ‘over there’, and attend to my own cultures...? Yes and No... we must address other cultures, since we increasingly live in a world where we will rely on one another, where not to know will be dangerous. We need to contribute to the decentering of Western culture, and it helps for us to focus on other cultures. Our own paradigms are further opened up, changed in beneficial ways, through the challenges that other cultures offer. Yet we can only enter from where we stand, unless we want simply to mimic those we aim to know about. Mimicry (what Paul Willemin calls ‘ventriliquism’) is not knowledge. Knowledge can only happen as we enter into a dialogue with the other culture, as we dare to look at it within frameworks we bring with us rather than trying to get inside ‘their’ frameworks, and losing ourselves in the process. That does no-one any kind of service. No-one learns anything that way. Past Aboriginal culture appears difficult to dialogue with, precisely because it is so invisible, because it leaves so few traces for the outsider to experience for her/himself. But perhaps contemporary Aboriginal culture leaves room for dialogue. (1989:13)

Kaplan’s engagement in a serious discussion about Moffatt’s early film Nice Coloured Girls and award-winning Night Cries — A Rural Tragedy is the kind of critical dialogue to which she refers, and which is so absent from Australian considerations of Aboriginal filmmaking:

Like Nice Coloured Girls, Night Cries makes an important cultural intervention. Just as locating and celebrating Aboriginal racial specificity is one important current intervention, so also is starting the task of seeing cultural inter-relatedness. Even as an outsider, one can appreciate (indeed, Moffatt’s works precisely help one appreciate) the difficulty of formulating desirable modes of cultural inter-relatedness in Australia: as the first ‘Australians’, how do Aborigines want now (after all that has happened) to relate to later Anglo-Celt, European and Asian immigrants? Is absorption into the Anglo mainstream a desirable goal? Is cultivating ethnic/racial difference best? Should the focus be on rewriting the past from a self-conscious perspective?

As the point of intersection between the historical and the psychic, representation provides a central space within which to explore such issues, as Moffatt’s work proves. Her works examine the impact of the past on the present—they explore the present on past inter-racial happenings in cultural codes of today. Moffatt’s interest in ‘correcting’ in Night Cries the constructions of jidida from a generous perspective... opens up useful space where the slow process of healing the wounds of the past, of imagining new Australian ‘faces’ (in the sense analysed in the SBS documentary Moffatt helped produce), can perhaps begin. (1989:16-17)

Kaplan, perhaps understandably, underestimates the presence...
of Aboriginal images in Australian film and television. There is a long history of images of Aboriginal people and culture, as Leigh has documented.

One starting point in this essay is the need to convey to other Australians in the film and television industries a sense of the political and aesthetic issues which concern Aboriginal people. Most Aboriginal people involved in production of artforms believe that an ethical, post-colonial critique and practice among their non-Aboriginal colleagues is possible and achievable. It is, after all, the desire to make aesthetic and political statements which motivates both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to create films, videos or television programs.

‘Aboriginality’ has a significant bearing on the nature of the problem of representation. Therefore, it is important to place Aboriginal people in a social relationship with the filmmaking and television world in an analytical sense.

The issue of Aboriginal involvement in production is complex, socially, politically and aesthetically, particularly for funding bodies. It is not simply a matter of side-stepping and blurring difficult issues of a political and cultural nature. The issues are opaque for more general and universal reasons to do with colonial and post-colonial perceptions of ‘Aboriginality’, the ‘primitive’, the ‘savage’, and historical, political, technological and aesthetic issues which film- and videomaking and television production accentuate or engender.

The problem is not necessarily one of racial discrimination as the 1991 complaint to the Human Rights Commission might lead people to conclude. (See The Sydney Morning Herald, November 20, 1991). The Australian Film Commission had refused to grant funds to producer Briann Kearney and director Brian Syron for the post-production phases of Jindalee Lady. What led the Commission to back down from its considered judgments on aesthetics after Syron’s complaint to the Human Rights Commission on the grounds of racial discrimination? Why did the Australian Film Commission agree, at the conciliation meeting, to fund the film ‘through to completion, and to establish policies and guidelines on the funding of future Aboriginal film projects...[and] to appoint an Aboriginal consultant?’ Syron’s complaint was backed up by correspondence from Aboriginal organisations supporting his demand for post-production funds. Indeed, one Aboriginal woman was heard to say: ‘Well I didn’t like it, but I had to support it, because at least it didn’t portray us as drunks’. Why is it OK to be portrayed as one-dimensional or as a brainless bimbo, and not as habitually drunk?

There is a naive belief that Aboriginal people will make ‘better’ representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives ‘greater’ understanding. This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated Other. More specifically, the assumption is that all Aboriginals are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on. It is a demand for censorship: there is a ‘right’ way to be Aboriginal, and any Aboriginal film or video producer will necessarily make a ‘true’ representation of ‘Aboriginality’.

This thinking is as much based on fear of difference as is white Australian racism. If we only look at that which makes us feel safe, that which tells us that we are what we would like to imagine ourselves to be, we will become naked emperors and empresses, or even ‘dead niggers’ in the parlance of Los Angeles rap music. (Real Niggaz Don’t Die, Niggaz With Attitude, MCA Music).

I contend that the central problem is not one of racial discrimination, although I do not deny that it might be a factor in specific or general encounters. Rather, the central problem is the
need to develop a body of knowledge on representation of Aboriginal people and their concerns in art, film, television and other media and a critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, drawing from Aboriginal world views, from Western traditions and from history.

The body of literature which is helpful in approaching this problem comes from a range of disciplines and subject areas. I now turn to the most relevant of that work, to examine more thoroughly aspects of politics and aesthetics in representations of Aboriginal matters.

The social relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

Who is Aboriginal? What is Aboriginal?

For Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the State. They find white perceptions of 'Aboriginality' are disturbing because of the history of forced removal of children, denial of civil rights and dispossession of land.

The label 'Aboriginal' has become one of the most disputed terms in the Australian language. There are High Court decisions and opinions on the term and its meaning. Legal scholars, John McCorquodale, has noted sixty-seven definitions of Aboriginal people, mostly relating to their status as wards of the State and to criteria for incarceration in institutional reserves.

These definitions reflect not only the Anglo-Australian legal and administrative obsession, even fixation, with Aboriginal people, but also the uncertainty, confusion and constant search for the appropriate characterisation: 'full blood', 'half-caste', 'quadroon', 'octroon', 'such and such an admixture of blood', 'a native of Australia', 'a native of an admixture of blood not less than half

Aboriginal' and so on. In one legal case, whether or not an Aboriginal person lived in a 'native's camp' even became an important issue of definition.

This fixation on classification reflects the extraordinary intensification of colonial administration of Aboriginal affairs from 1788 to the present. Elaborate systems of control aimed, until recently, at exterminating one kind of 'Aboriginality' and replacing it with a sanitised version acceptable to the Anglo invaders and immigrants. Perhaps, Aboriginal affairs is the longest 'race' experiment in history? It is certainly a monument to the failure of 'social engineering'.

The Commonwealth definition relies on High Court opinion. It is more social than racial: an Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal.

This definition is preferred by the vast majority of Aboriginal people over the racial definitions of the assimilation era. Administration of the definition, at least by the Commonwealth for the purposes of providing grants or loans, requires that an applicant present a certificate of 'Aboriginality', issued by an incorporated Aboriginal body under its common seal.

However, as Sally Morgan's first best seller, *My Place*, demonstrated to the nation, the problem is not so straightforward. Morgan 'found' her 'Aboriginality' in adulthood, by suspecting a deceit. One wonders what the appeal of *My Place* was to such a large readership. Perhaps Morgan assuages the guilt of the whites, especially white women, who were complicit in the assimilation program and the deception into which families like the Morgans felt they were forced? After all, Sally turned out to be a fine young lady, didn't she?

Or could the attraction be, as one of my sisters suggested, that *My Place* raises the possibility that the reader might also find, with
a little sleuthing in the family tree, an Aboriginal ancestor? This is a startling perception. Yes, Morgan raises the possibility for the reader that he or she would thus acquire the genealogical, even biological ticket ('my great-great grandmother was Aboriginal') to enter the world of 'primitivism'.

What could be the motive for this desire to find and consume the primitive? Torgovnick, an American cultural theorist, provides some answers in her deconstruction of the habit of iconising the 'primitive'. She points out that it is intrinsic to Western culture, as a mechanism for grappling with fear of the unknown and apparently known, the uncertain and the apparently certain, as a search for the perceived intrinsic value of the 'primitive' and, at the same time, for masking the relations of colonialism and racism ('the rhetoric of control'). She writes:

But there is more at stake here than a colonialist denial of the complexity of primitive societies or a nostalgia for the lost simplicity of the past...the general idea of the primitive becomes a place to project feelings about the present and to draw blueprints of the future. Sometimes narratives about primitive societies become allegories of modernization that resist seeing themselves or presenting themselves as allegories...They are an acute 'test case' for processes we are all undergoing. We record their 'native' traditions under the pressure of ours. But maybe what we are really doing—though we cannot admit it for a number of reasons—is handling by displacement, the series of dislocations that we call modernity and postmodernity—handling it by studying places where, supposedly, it does not exist and yet does exist...In the fears and hopes we express for them, the primitives, we air fears and hopes for ourselves—caught on a rollercoaster of change that we like to believe can be stopped, safely, at will...We have no need to 'go primitive' because we have already 'gone primitive' by the fact of being born into our culture...imagining 'them' in order to imagine 'us'—savage intellects leading modern lives....The West seems to need the primitive as a precondition and a supplement to its sense of self. It always creates heightened versions of the primitive as nightmare or pleasant dream. The question of whether that need must or will always take fearful or exploitative forms remains pressing. (1990: 244-246)

Aboriginal critiques of My Place are largely unpublished, but there have been many salon discussions. Another friend suggests that none of the reviewers noticed that Morgan's book is 'really about' concealing not the 'Aboriginality' of the family, but the origins of the family in incest.

Whatever the case, the enormous response by white Australia to the book lies somewhere in the attraction to something forbidden—'Aboriginality' or incest—and the apparent investigation and revelation of that forbidden thing through style and family history. It recasts 'Aboriginality', so long suppressed, as acceptable, bringing it out into the open. The book is a catharsis. It gives release and relief, not so much to Aboriginal people oppressed by psychotic racism, but to the whites who wittingly and unwittingly participated in it.

Where my discussion is pointing here is that 'Aboriginality' is not just a label to do with skin colour or the particular idea a person carries around in his/her head which might be labelled Aboriginal such as an Aboriginal language or kinship system. 'Aboriginality' is a social thing in the sense used by the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim.

'Aboriginality' arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book.

Moreover, the creation of 'Aboriginality' is not a fixed thing. It is created from our histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white in a dialogue. From the time that Herodorus described the customs of North African people up to the Victorian era when the English idolatized certain fictive features of 'classical civilization' (Greek and Roman), exploration and discovery led to
views which arose as much from the history of ideas about savages, barbarians and others as from what was observed on distant shores. Aboriginal people meeting their first white men in 1788 (and possibly earlier in 1770) thought they were ghosts, spirits of the dead returning to be with their relations. The reality of the invasion only became clear some time later, probably in 1790 when the British military and penal settlement was well established.

Before Cook and Phillip, there was no ‘Aboriginality’ in the sense that is meant today. (There is a long cross-cultural experience over perhaps a thousand years in northern Australia with Asians and Papuans, but this history is not well documented.) The term ‘Aboriginal’, and the colonial and post-colonial implications of the concept, began to take shape in Australia to some extent in 1770, but more so in 1788.

Before contact, there were Yolngu, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri, Waka Waka, Guugu Yimidhirr, or whatever the ‘Gadigal’ or ‘Eora’ actually called themselves, and so on. As historian Henry Reynolds points out in The Other Side of the Frontier, some groups such as the Guugu Yimidhirr began to see whites only in terms of an identifiable and different group rather than random individuals one hundred years after contact when the effect of colonisation had proved so consistently brutal and devastating. However, while Aboriginal people saw whites as a group, they did not see them as a ‘race’. This was a concept of the whites.

I...object: ‘Aboriginality’ and intertextuality

‘Aboriginality’ only has meaning when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects.

In analysing the signifying practices in Australian racism, Julia

Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality in film and video is useful though complex. It involves the components of a text and it is the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position (Kristeva, 1980: 15).

Textual analysis of the racist stereotypes and mythologies which inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal people is revealing. The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists.

Films, video and television are powerful media: it is from these that most Australians ‘know’ about Aboriginal people. The Aborigines that Australians ‘know’ are Bennelong, Jedda and Marbik in Chauvel’s Jedda, Bony, or the characters of Ion Idriess such as the rebel, Jandewarra. Like these fictional characters, Evonne Goolagong (not the actual Mrs Cawley), Senator Neville Bonner, Governor Doug Nicholls (known more popularly as Pastor Doug Nicholls) and even Charles Perkins are figures of the imagination generated by Australian image producers. They are safe, distant distortions of an actual world of people who will not bring down the neighbourhood real estate values.

The world of Aboriginal sociality and politics is also distant and shadowy. Ernie Dingo and Gary Foley, Aboriginal comedians and actors, have perceived this impulse in colonial relations. They have transformed the coloniser’s caricatures of us into satirical rhetoric through comedy performances which subvert the comfort of white Australia.

‘Aboriginality’, therefore, is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal
and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’, so that in the infinite array of intercultural experiences there might be said to be three broad categories of cultural and textual construction of ‘Aboriginality’.

One category is the experience of the Aboriginal person interacting with other Aboriginal people in social situations located largely within Aboriginal culture. There is never a totally closed Aboriginal experience, however, because even the few remaining Pintubi living traditionally in the Western Desert know of, have seen, and have some explanation of the fences, windmills, four wheel drive vehicle tracks and other evidence which whites leave behind. They know too that they have kinsfolk living in remote Northern Territory settlements such as Kintore and Papunya, or in the outstations, who have adopted some “whitefella” technology and ways of doing things.

I have been asked by Aboriginal people in such situations, ‘Why do white people have curtains on their windows?’ and ‘Why do white people wear sunglasses?’ Normally there is no one to explain. Not knowing much at first hand about whites, Aboriginal people in remote regions develop some extraordinary theories about whites. ‘Who are these strangers?’ they ask.

As a second category of cultural and textual construction of things ‘Aboriginal’, there are the familiar stereotypes and the constant stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people. These icons of ‘Aboriginality’ are produced by Anglo-Australians, not in dialogue with Aboriginal people, but from other representations such as the ‘stone age savage’, the ‘dying race’, the ‘one penny stamp Aborigine’, the Pelaco Shirt Aborigine, Venus Half Caste, the Cinesound News Service caricatures, Crocodile Dundee I and II, ‘the received wisdom’. They are inherited, imagined representations. ‘All Aborigines are dirty, drunk and useless, and they’re going to die out anyway’, say some white people without hesitation or qualification.

A third category is those constructions which are generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, be it at a supermarket check-out or in a film co-production. In these exchanges, as in any social interaction, the individuals involved will test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as the responses are processed, to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other. It is in these dialogues (in the world of film, the co-production Two Laws is an example) that working models of ‘Aboriginality’ are constructed as ways of seeing Aboriginal people, but both the Aboriginal subject and the non-Aboriginal subject are participating.

Can films, videos and television re-educate people to be non-racist and eliminate racism? Why do so many Australian institutions remain racist after years of anti-discrimination legislation and rejection of racist notions in education programs?

Perhaps we should ask, rather, why are some people not racist? Indeed, for the purposes of this essay, it is important to recognise that there are some people who are not racist and take the anti-racist sentiment in the film and television industry further.

This points to the importance of the argument on intersubjectivity and intertextuality: the need to test imagined models against each other.

The question we should be asking is: what informs the mythologies and symbols? The answer has to do with the stance of the participant within the dominant culture, within the colony. For instance, Aboriginal life in modern Australia has been described as ‘welfare colonialism’ and the encapsulation of Aboriginal society as ‘internal colonization’. Although this kind of analysis could be
applied at one level to the economic condition of some Aboriginal people, there are other clear social and economic formations. The hunting and gathering mode is one, even though it is now supplemented by art production and by social security entitlements which enable the purchase of store-bought foods.

Whatever the economic conditions, the discourse is colonial. The term ‘discourse’ is used here in the sense meant by Michel Foucault as a system of power. The subject speaks back, and the dominant culture is informed by Aboriginal cultural practices, particularly practices of resistance.

Afro-American cultural critic, Michelle Wallace, analyses the intertextuality of Afro-American and mainstream American culture in this way:

‘...its capacity to turn racism against itself, to deconstruct it, is its most consistently recurrent and characteristic feature...The point is that a ‘pure’ Afro-American culture untainted by the marketplace, or by ‘negative’ images, is inconceivable...the consumption and production of culture is a complex collective psychological process that can simultaneously reconstitute an effective ‘strategy of containment’, even as it may articulate a ‘utopian impulse’.’ (1990:2)

Signs and ‘Aboriginality’

The particularities of Australian and Aboriginal history and culture are the stuff of cultural production and of the way we create signs for seeing each other.

Our different stance in history shapes the models we use. All representations are derived from, and react against, historical representations and historical symbols of ‘Aboriginality’.

From inside, a culture is ‘felt’ as normative, not deviant. It is European culture which is different for an Aboriginal person.

Aboriginal people had no eugenicist theory, no need to theorise a racial superiority to justify exploitation or land theft. Now, of course, some Aboriginal people even think in racial rather than social terms, in exclusive rather than inclusive terms. For instance ‘yella fella’ is a ‘racial’ (not racist) term for a part-Aboriginal person that is used in some restricted contexts in remote Australia.

In addition, Aboriginal people have no pyramidal hierarchy of social and technological evolution, no ‘Stone Age, ‘Iron Age’ etc. The closest some Aboriginal people might come is to talk of the people in the bush as ‘myalls’ because of their lack of knowledge of white society. Aboriginal people such as at Yuendumu and Ernabella, to name just two communities, have adopted computer, satellite and television technology and certainly have no conception of themselves as ‘Stone Age’.

What the non-Aboriginal subject often fails to consciously articulate is a model of ‘European’ or whatever the case might be—British, Irish, Vietnamese, Italian. He/She also fails very often to allow Aboriginal people to articulate their own models of what they perceive ‘Europeans’ to be.

In the same way that many of the world’s successful filmmakers choose violence and horror as points of crescendo and resolution in the dramas they portray, so they use Aboriginal people to tell iconic tales of horror or humour in speaking of ‘whites’ or ‘kadiya’ or ‘gub’. These Aboriginal representations, constructed in editing rooms, are tokenistic. They are stereotypes by whites of what Aboriginal people are imagined to think. In some films, television and video, the directors/editors/writers/producers, black and white, seem to want Aboriginal people to iconise ‘the oppressor’. They edit in the ‘gub’ and ‘kadiya’ stories and leave Aboriginal stories of good times with white people—the flotsam and jetsam of the working models—on the cutting room floor. These filmmakers want to see ‘Europeans’ portrayed only as oppressors and all the complexities
eliminated. They fail to admit the intersubjectivity of black/white relations. In the recent collection, *Cultural Studies*, edited by Grossberg and others, Afro-American feminist theorist, bell hooks, writes:

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretence. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretence that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken—are not allowed. (1992: 341)

‘European’, ‘white’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘black’ are signifiers of much larger meanings which are difficult to translate. Indeed, they convey emotionally significant meanings more immediately than thoughtful interrogations might reveal.

Most people who come into contact with ‘Aboriginal affairs’ remark on (or are tempted to) the difficulty of dealing with Aboriginal people and things Aboriginal. Some say there is among Aboriginal people an almost deliberate unwillingness to be understood. Talking to ‘them’ is confusing, disorienting. There is a danger. It is too hard. The overwhelming temptation for many non-Aboriginal people is to delegate their responsibilities to an Aboriginal person or committee, or label the nature of the dealing under another rubric such as welfare, multiculturalism, or even criminality. Some ignore, suppress or censor the problem altogether in an effort to avoid the issues, in particular the one of difference.

These are the responses of white Australians who want to abdicate their responsibility to avoid repeating the mistakes of history. The central problem is the failure of non-Aboriginals to comprehend us Aboriginal people, or to find the grounds for an understanding. Each policy—protection, assimilation, integration, self-management, self-determination and, perhaps, reconciliation—can be seen as ways of avoiding understanding.

That Aboriginal people, ways of doing things or saying things, appearances and style, are so extremely different from the Anglo-Australian norm, whatever that might be, has been a recurring theme in Australian history. It is also a problem which has bedevilled the most brilliant commentators.

Anthropologist, John von Sturmer captures something of the perceptual problem for white Australians in relation to the subjectivity of ‘Aboriginality’:

One senses that there is...[a] destructiveness directed at Aboriginal societies, that they...can only be treated as spectacle, as tableau. Is it because they lie beyond the possibility of a truly lived engagement? It is still the case, as it has been from the very beginning, that they do not live according to ‘civilised’ notions of society, refinement, propriety, group welfare or personal well-being. They fight too much, they drink too much, fuck too much, they are too demanding, they waste their money and destroy property. But a lack of restraint, caution, or calculation is not necessarily an absence or a failing. It can be a superfluity. A refusal: a refusal to accept the repressive principle, a refusal which repels yet at the same time exerts a powerful fascination. It brings down upon the obstinate bearers of that refusal—one which is seen to be infantile and irresponsible—a fierce resentment. For the refusal is seen as an impossibility, generating a life both forbidden and unendurable. So it has to be annulled, denied or driven off precisely into the realms of infantilism and irresponsibility, into fantasy states, fit only for traveller’s tales and allegories. (1989:139)

The problem of discussing the politics and aesthetics in film and television production by or about Aboriginal lies in the positioning of us as object, and the person behind the camera as subject. If we are so misplaced, it is therefore not surprising that the political and aesthetic critique of these images is so muted. The problem remains one of dominance.

One result, which Michaels discusses in ‘Bad Aboriginal Art’ in relation to Warlpiri acrylic paintings, is the absence of discrimination, in the aesthetic sense of the word. He considers the:
...‘mise en discours’ by which Aboriginal Australian paintings are positioned for sale in contemporary markets, in order to ask what chance exists for the work to command serious prices, and to note some peculiar difficulties of evaluating it. I want to consider the curious fact that almost nothing of this work is ever designated ‘bad’—a lacuna which would not seem to make it easy to sell anything as especially good, either. There are exceptions (including a vulgar judgment that all primitive art is bad)...(1988: 59)

While Michaels is specifically discussing the difficult position of Western Desert Aboriginal acrylic painting in terms of the absence of any consensus in aesthetic taste in Western society, his analysis of the creative and authorial practices which preclude valuation, and even evaluation, of traditional Aboriginal art is relevant to the discussion here.

Representational and aesthetic statements of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people transform the Aboriginal reality. They are accounts. It is in these representations that Aboriginal as subject becomes, under the white gaze imagining the Aboriginal, the object. The audience, however, might be entirely unaware that they are observing an account, usually by the authorial We of the Other. The creative efforts of filmmakers, video producers, broadcasters and artists to represent some particular Aboriginal ‘reality’, even if there is an attempt at involving the Aboriginal subject in the production, is always a fictionalisation, an act of creative authority.

Self-conscious fictionalisation, such as Night Cries (Moffatt, 1989), makes us aware of the act of fictionalisation, of the distinction between the author and the subject, by using devices such as artifice. Michaels’ consideration of Warlpiri painting practices tells us that their creative and authorial practices are very different. I will return to a discussion of community-based production practices in Sections Four and Five.

When only banality will do: the obsession with ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ images

Michelle Wallace argues that the binary opposition of ‘negative’ versus ‘positive’ images too often sets the limits on cultural criticism.

Mainstream culture habitually assumes that the first job of Afro-American mass culture (or any ‘minority’ cultural production in which ‘race’ is an issue) should be to ‘uplift the race’, or to salvage the denigrated image of blacks in the white American imagination. As a consequence, judgements on the part of both white and black cultural critics of Afro-American cultural production aimed at a black audience tend to circulate around the failure or success of this usually explicit project. (1990:1)

Wallace points out that there are, however, several problems with the negative/positive images conception in mass or popular culture.

The racism of the conviction that blacks are morally and/or intellectually inferior defines the ‘common sense’ perception of blacks. However, reversal of these assumptions using a positive/negative cultural formula (e.g. blacks are superior or more compassionate) does not challenge racism. It may, in fact, corroborate racism. In the popular Afro-American television program, The Cosby Show, for example, Wallace points out:

that blacks are shown as characters who possess ‘positive’ attributes of white culture, which are really the attributes of a hypothetical and impracticable absence (or commodification) of culture. ‘Culture’ is then reduced to a style of consumption that offers up, say, expensive, exotic-looking handmade sweaters, or a brief scene of the Cosbys at a jazz club where a black woman is singing, rather than any concrete or complex textualisation of cultural difference. Indeed the show seems to suggest, in its occasional use of Latinos as well as blacks, that no-one is ultimately different, since culture is something you can buy at Bloomingdale’s, a kind of wardrobe or a form of entertainment. (1990:2)
The negative/positive images conception, in particular, lacks the crucial capacity to differentiate between the visual and the textual. Indeed, as Wallace points out, combinations of racism and sexism are much harder to diagnose in visual modes than in discursive modes, just as they are much more palatable in the form of art or photography than in the form of analysis.

The reasons for this are complex, but the two central ones have to do with the unique psychological role that images play. This compels them to function as a kind of ideological smokescreen. Wallace argues that it is crucial to differentiate and diagnose the problem of negation in the visual realm because people, especially black people, or the colonised, know so little in a conscious way about how images affect them.

In *Backroads* (1977), directed by Phil Noyce (with actors Gary Foley, Bill Hunter and Essie Coffey), we are taken for the first time to an Aboriginal reserve where the people are happy, not only because they are inebriated, but because they possess a radical sense of humour and sing in the laconic Aboriginal country and western style. But *Backroads* was actually about much more than blacks being happy in their place. Foley, like Bob Maza, Bobbie Merritt and other Aboriginal people in the arts, gained theatrical training in the Black Theatre in Redfern from the early to the mid 1970s. It was here that cynical anti-racist humour became a powerful mode of expression.

There are glimpses of this humour in the *Backroads* narrative of a journey of a car-load of alienated misfits. The subversive theme allows the Aboriginal people of the Brewarrina reserve, notably Coffey, to convey a sense of the real them: grog, cynicism, resistance and all. Subsequently, people like Coffey were allowed into white Australian society, if only on the critical cultural fringe singing in the Native Rose in Chippendale, Sydney, and making that wonderful film *My Survival As An Aboriginal* in 1979.

*Well I heard it on the Radio and I saw it on the Television...*

It was through this film too that some of the Aboriginal audience developed a cringe about the ‘negative’ portrayal of alcohol consumption by Aboriginal people, however honest and without malice this portrayal was. This cringe has remained a discomforting and, I would argue, a conservative restraint on Aboriginal creativity.
Section Three: Decentering the 'Race' Issue —
Case Studies in 'Aboriginality'

Culture, gender and desire

The intersection of 'race' and gender (as markers of difference) helps to unravel meanings in representations of 'Aboriginality'. An analysis of the work of three different artists—Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon and Brian Syron—reveals different deconstructions of 'Aboriginality'.

In all three works, the stance of the artist is decisive. The field of tension between the individual artist and the social audience (funding bodies, critics etc.) is where the issues are indecisive and indeterminate because the act of interpreting these works requires theorising gender and 'race'.

It is how the audience responds that creates the debate, as much as what the artist said. This is why strategies of intervention are so important. Theory must be one strategy. Without theories of 'race' and gender which are historically and culturally relevant to Aboriginal people and white Australia, we cannot interpret our artists.

The return of Jedda

Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955) expresses all those ambiguous emotions, fears and false theories which revolve in Western thought around the spectre of the 'primitive'. It rewrites Australian history so that the black rebel against white colonial rule is a rebel against the laws of his own society. Marbuk, a 'wild' Aboriginal man, is condemned to death, not by the white coloniser, but by his own
elders. It is Chauvel’s inversion of truth on the black/white frontier, as if none of the brutality, murder and land clearances occurred.

The witchcraft or sorcery of Marbuk lures away J jedda, the young Aboriginal woman, from the civilising influence of the homestead couple who have adopted her and provided her with decent clothes, food and education (symbolised by Humphrey McQueen’s piano). As J jedda plays the piano, ‘tribal chants’ rise up and take control of her Aboriginal mind buried deep within her new, constructed, made over, civilised one. She follows Marbuk into the bush where he performs a magical rite, to which she has no resistance. She pays for her ‘instinctive, native weakness’ with her life when she is dragged over a cliff by Marbuk who is fleeing from Joe, the good ‘half-caste boy’.

In Night Cries, A Rural Tragedy (1990), Moffatt brings J jedda (played by myself) back to life as if forty years have passed. J jedda is now caring for her adoptive mother who is ancient and waiting to die. None of the male characters have survived and the homestead is a ruin.

Moffatt’s ‘feminine gaze’ reconstructs the relationship between J jedda and her adoptive mother as one between women as independent beings, but perhaps they are not whole. The characters are imagined beings, ghostlike, merely guides to what the audience might invent, just as Chauvel’s J jedda was. Night Cries can be read as an autobiographical exploration of Moffatt’s relationship with her own foster mother. The film asks questions about the role of ‘mother’ in adoptive mother/daughter relationships.

The lives and experiences of J jedda and her adoptive mother in Moffatt’s reconstruction of them are not mediated by men, not by J jedda’s adoptive white father nor by Marbuk, the handsome black outlaw/seducer, nor by Joe, the sensible, civilised half-caste ringer to whom J jedda should have been attracted and become married.

All the men are disappeared.

What Moffatt was trying to correct in the text of J edda is the Western fascination with the ‘primitive’.

Moffatt’s inversion of colonial history is to play out the worst fantasies of those who took Aboriginal children from their natural parents to assimilate and ‘civilise’ them. Perhaps the worst nightmare of the adoptive parents is to end life with the black adoptive child as the only family, the only one who cares. Moffatt’s construction of that nightmare is subversive because the style and materiality of the homestead set is so reminiscent of Aboriginal poverty.

Chauvel’s once privileged homestead now resembles the inside of a humpy. Moffatt takes us from the homestead—an exhibition of the wealth extracted from the slave labour of the Aboriginal men and women on the Australian pastoral station—to the poverty represented in her sets. The middle-aged Aboriginal woman on the now deserted station feeds the dying white mother canned food, and all the excesses of the historical/economic moment of the Australian cattle station are collapsed.

But what about the black men disposed of by Moffatt? Their absence deserves some attention because of what they signify some forty years after the making of J edda. Moffatt’s inversion forces the audience to look not at the desire of Chauvel’s J edda but at death, and at the consequences of Western imagination of the ‘primitive’, as we wait in the deteriorating homestead with a middle-aged Aboriginal woman and her dying mother.

Today, J edda is sickening and, at the same time, laughable in its racism. (Indeed, some people might have seen it then as racist.) It was a big, although not very successful feature movie, and has become since an icon of Australian film.

What response did the audience of the 1950s have to this film? Our speculations might begin with the possible colonial/gender reactions. There is the implicit impossibility of white men being
threatened by Marbuk, precisely because he inevitably dies as a result of his breach of Aboriginal law. He is eliminated. So inexorably will his ‘race’ die out because of the asserted inherent Darwinian weakness of Aborigines, morally and genetically, according to Australian eugenicist theory.

Could there have been a secret identification with Jedd among the white women in the cinema audience? Might they have been captivated and fascinated by the story of Marbuk’s sorcery and seduction, (silently subverting in the heat of the dark cinema the repressive patriarchy which they had to endure); a seduction so much more exciting and dangerous than the Rock Hudson type of seduction in the Hollywood romance?

Tarzan of the Apes, also known as the Earl of Greystokes, may have had a similar attraction. But Marbuk is ‘genuinely’ ‘wild’ and so much more mysterious and unknowable. Chauvel really did exceed, however subtly for the times, the pinnacle of primitive sexual licentiousness as Tarzan represented it then. (Cf. Malone, 1987:141)

Marianna Torgovnick, Professor of English at Duke University, deconstructs the mystification of colonialism in Tarzan in these terms:

...Tarzan funds himself (after losing the Greystoke inheritance in business scams) exclusively by raiding gold and jewels from the lost city of Opar. Tarzan thus replicates the actions of colonialism without ever approving of colonialism itself. In this, Tarzan resembles many of his readers in the West, even when their beliefs and politics are humane or anti-imperialist. His prosperity, our prosperity depends—seemingly inevitably—on the poverty of others.

What are we to make of the book’s contradictory and conflicting views on ‘race’, colonialism and imperialism? I believe we must perceive and stress the conflicts themselves. The Tarzan materials have often been dismissed as ‘racist’, as the product of a colonialist era; within current critical trends, readings of the Tarzan novels as imperialist fantasies are sure to come. But the words ‘racist’ and ‘imperialist’ do not tell us clearly enough how the stories work. Tarzan recognizes the blacks’ humanity and resents any violation of it. Yet he feels himself distinctively different from blacks and enforces superiority in his relations with African tribes. The books condemn slavery and yet represent it as a constant in human cultures. The books loathe colonialism and imperialism and yet they valorize ideas that made (and make) Euro-American colonialism and imperialism possible. With regard to ‘race’ and related issues, the books are as contradictory and double as our culture is, as confused as Tarzan himself is: Are nonwhites so very different from whites? And if they are not so different, why have whites exploited them? Enslaved them? Killed them? The books do not, finally, find it necessary to decide. Tarzan can take blacks, or leave them. They help him define his manliness, but do not really threaten it. Women on the other hand, Tarzan cannot do without. (1990:62)

Tarzan can go on for hundreds of episodes because he is the coloniser, if somewhat mystified in his pseudo-primitive costume. Indeed, Tarzan and Jane marry, presumably in a High Church of England ceremony, and social relations are normalised even if the monkeys are still living in the bedroom in the trees.

But Marbuk and his paramour, the poor seduced Jedd, must die. It is precisely because of Marbuk’s lust that Chauvel destroys him. His is the lust of a ‘real primitive’. He is an outlaw. He refuses to submit to civilization.

As fictive male characters, Tarzan, Marbuk and Joe are imagined models of ‘race’ and gender. The difference between them as models of men is their place in colonial mythology and in the power relations which they represent. They have their equivalents in the anthropomorphised models of colonialism.

Tarzan’s equivalent is Babar the Elephant orphaned by a white hunter. On finding civilisation after a short walk from the jungle, he is clothed in a delightful green suit and is educated in Paris, all at the expense of the rich old woman who finds him wandering the streets of the city.

Joe is the emasculated native and black buffoon of a thousand movies. Marbuk’s equivalent is King Kong.
Black Like Mi

Each representation of Aboriginal people is a reconstruction, an imagined experience, a tale told with signifiers, grammatical and morphological elements, mythologies.

The Black Like Mi series (1992) is a photographic essay by Destiny Deacon on representations of black women using images of black dolls and covers from books such as Venus Half Case. It was shown at the Boomalli Co-operative. Deacon, a tutor in English Literature at Melbourne University, identifies the resonances of early melodramatic representations of native women in films and literature of the 1940s and 1950s through the medium of photography. Previously, Moffatt had reinvented the half-caste siren in the photographic essay, Something More (1989).

Deacon explains to us in the two photographs, Dark times with Otis and Alias 1 and 2, that the 'black velvet' perception of the lascivious white male gaze on Aboriginal woman is a mediated sexual experience. These two photographs in particular, but also the series as a whole, reverse the pornographic experience—the signification of the 'black velvet' image.

There is a song about 'black velvet' from the Australian pastoral frontier which expresses the colonial lust of drovers demanding a fuck after a hard day's work. The term has passed into 'redneckspreek', and the subliminal power of the concept also ricochets around most of the sexual images of Aboriginal women.

Deacon has a black female doll, dressed in red, black and yellow, who lies in bed next to a black male doll. She is reading to him from the novel, Venus Half Case. In the next scene, she has rolled over on her side and is reading to herself from the book, doubtless, having a little black doll fantasy about 'inter-racial sex'.

'Ha, ha ha, I wonder how little black dolls do it?' she forces us to ask. We black girls have a special experience with little black dolls because they are a very recent, modern artefact in Australia. When we were growing up there were only golliwogs. Then Black Americans demanded in the 1970s that the toy market produce beautiful, well-dressed black dolls, formed in plastic to appear life-like, just like the white dolls. So we came to them late in life.

I remember my first experience in my thirties, standing gazing at a black doll. Everywhere around were these white dolls, loaded with cultural meaning: Barbie, with her gorgeous wardrobe, an appendaged boyfriend, the ultimate toy boy, with a lot of style; Cindy, with a pretty pink gingham check dress and white shoes and socks, who walked and talked. But only little white girls could look into the eyes of these post-oedipal mirrors and find that wonderland of self-imagination.

Imagine the power we black girls derived from, at last, having that experience with a black doll. Deacon gazes through the mirror of the little black doll. Hers is also the feminine gaze. As she looks at the black dolls, boy and girl, in bed, she erases the possibility of white men seeing this sexual scene that she has created. She denies white male voyeurism. She denies the aural, sexual and colonialist conquest. At the same time, in a sideways glance, she places the white male within her view, the white male who imagined the 'black velvet' and who, as a subject/object of Deacon's representation, is denied a peep at the doll.

She makes impotent the white male fantasy of 'black velvet'.

Black man, black woman, ...

What could these labels possibly mean? Jindalee Lady (1992), directed by Brian Syron, and sometimes hailed as the first Aboriginal feature film, challenges us to find the meaning conveyed in these terms. It demonstrates that it is hard to figure out what is precisely meant by 'a black man' or 'a black woman': they are fictions, acts
of imagining. You have to know who is doing the imagining, and why.

In *Jindalee Lady*, Lauren, a young Aboriginal woman, (played by Lydia Miller), is a fashion designer married to a white man. She falls in love with a handsome Aboriginal man, a photographer (played by Michael Leslie), who recognises her ‘Aboriginal spirituality’, hence the title *Jindalee Lady*. (Jindalee in real life, is a suburb of Brisbane consisting of hectares of franchise-designed brick houses with landscaped gardens full of imported palms, swimming pools and tennis courts. It might be where Queensland Premier, Wayne Goss, would like to live. Of course, there are many other places in Australia named Jindalee, and perhaps they are not all suburban horrors like the one in Brisbane.)

Lauren finds out that she is pregnant but is lured away from her success and wealth to be with her Aboriginal soul mate. The child, however, is cinematically killed off in a cot death scenario. The self-blaming of the successful careerist mother, whose eyes were not on the crib, tells us a great deal about the view of black women being portrayed here.

In a strange way, *Jindalee Lady* can be read as a post-modern remake of *Jedda*. The first hint at such a reading is the use of ‘ducks on the wall’ symbolism: the wild geese which fly across the screen to haunting music in *Jedda* make a second appearance in *Jindalee Lady*. Moreover, the handsome young black seducer is reminiscent of Marbuk in the portrayal of his sensuality and in his use of ‘Aboriginal sorcery’ to weaken Lauren. She says to him on the phone: ‘All that superstitious tribal stuff doesn’t frighten me.’ ‘Primitivism’ is dressed up with New Age style as perfectly reasonable behaviour among black yuppies who really appreciate Aboriginal culture. Thancoupie ceramic pots look so right in Japanese-inspired interior design.

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There is a moment of the film when, at a party to celebrate Lauren’s commercial success as a fashion designer, her close friend, a white woman, comes up and taps her on the shoulder and says in high class soap style, ‘You, Lauren, have made it’. What does this statement reveal?

Is it what every striving Aboriginal person is supposed to want to hear: approval and blessing from the white capitalist world? Why does a woman, not a man, give this blessing, as would be expected? Could it be that this film is a black male parody of the *haute couture* fashion industry?

Perhaps Syron, with his previous experience in the fashion industry in New York as well as in theatre direction and acting, has taken vogue-ing to its maximum, far beyond that shown in *Paris Is Burning*. This US documentary explored the practice among black men in New York of parading as famous, successful women such as Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Collins and Lisa Minnelli. There are some clues, for instance, when Lauren, Lydia Miller’s character, says to the Mother character, ‘Sometimes, I wish I was a man’.

It was Madonnà who made vogue-ing famous in her world hit pop song and video clip. *Haute couture*, or as Madonna reinterprets it—vogue-ing—is a safe haven for androgyny, for reshaping images and notions of gender, including male gender expressions.

*Paris is Burning*, Madonna’s video clip, and even *Jindalee Lady* are difficult to place. They do not fit easily into the emerging film genre where gay filmmakers have reclaimed their right to represent themselves. In re-presenting images of women, and men as women (transvestites) or vice versa, they often reveal fear and parody of women, as well as misogyny.

In *Jindalee Lady*, when Lauren’s friend walks up and says, ‘You, Lauren, have made it’, she is the agent for resolving the racial tensions within the self as constructed by ‘race’ and gender, which
have been identified by analysts of the Algerian revolution, Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon. The white man’s child is killed off cinematically, and the black man gets his black woman. Importantly, neither of them runs off with the rich white to be saved from hopeless poverty and fringedwelling.

Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, written in the 1960s during the Algerian civil war, introduced to the world for the first time an analysis of the intersection of gender and ‘race’. Syron has recast the masks and fleshed them out as imaginary Aboriginal Australian yuppies. They have come a long way, baby, from Fanon’s ‘wretched of the earth’

The intersection of ‘race’ and gender continues to require deconstruction to allow us to decolonise our consciousness. The powerful effect of racism in relation to gender is in stunting the growth of the self—as man or woman. Self is a subjective colony.

In the soap formula and low budget filmmaking, one often has to use the same cost cutting production techniques so that the script does not have to stand up to the same rigorous internal logic which is demanded of a high budget thriller. Jindalee Lady was made with a very small budget. Therefore we don’t ask of the script that it explain: how much money has the white husband invested in Lauren’s clothes design company; how much of the art on her office walls does he own; how can she afford to walk out on him; and, will she still be a successful clothes designer?

The economic and social problems are not resolved in the film. But that’s alright because ‘really spiritual Aboriginal love from the Dreamtime’ is what wins out in the end.

One of the arguments used to gather support for the funding of Jindalee Lady was that it was claimed to be the first Aboriginal feature film. (Bruce McGuinness made a 16mm film, Black Fire, in the early 1970s.) The other selling point was that the style of the film would present a ‘positive image’ of Aboriginal people.

There is an annoying tendency in the expression of the Australian paternalistic relationship with Aborigines: ‘the first Aborigine to graduate’, to play cricket, to box—and even to make a film.

...Film has an enormous potential...The first truly great Aboriginal film will not cause a revolutionary change in the Aboriginal situation, but it will make a lot of black backs stand up straighter, and a lot of people, white or black, feel prouder—not least because everybody from the second grip to the director will be Aboriginal. (Pitts, 1984: 15)

Syron, like Pitts, was caught in the in the grip of a paternalistic impulse: the trap of attributing to the medium of film itself some magical power to correct racism.

But why do whites and blacks get so worked up about the ‘first Aborigine to...’? It is a kind of declaration of having achieved some kind of equity, as if there were really something to celebrate in finally having overcome all the racism and other obstacles which Aborigines face in gathering the resources to do anything. Indeed, it is actually a denial of the racism against Aborigines. It is a way of saying that we are too backward to do it, not that we are denied the means to do it.

The dangers of the positive image/negative image concept become clear in Jindalee Lady as we find that gender issues are just as powerful as ‘race’ issues in construction of the self. The concept oppresses others, particularly women, because they can be cast as less than whole in idealisations of the good black woman, or in attacks on irresponsible careerist women.

Much of the ‘feminist’ criticism of The Good Woman of Bangkok (1991) which accused producer and director, Dennis O’Rourke, of exploiting a Thai prostitute, Aoi, falls into the trap of prescribing positive/negative images in cultural construction of ‘race’ and gender. Similarly, the resentment and anger from Aborig-
nal women and some white liberals against Moffatt’s *Nice Coloured Girls* were responses to its apparent failure to ‘salvage the demigriated image’ of black women. Wallace writes:

It seems to me particularly instructive that cultural production by black women, particularly black women who identify their views as ‘feminist’ or ‘womanist’, has often been denounced for promulgating ‘negative images’. Perhaps the most notable cases have been the controversies over Ntozake Shange’s play, *For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, my own Black Mamba and the Myth of the Superwoman*. Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Although it is possible to be critical of the failure of such work to challenge fundamentally mainstream or racist conceptions of black humanity or agency, it is important to observe that so-called ‘negative images’ will probably be necessary to any kind of reformulation or re-structuring of prevailing conceptions of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’. They seem particularly necessary to the inauguration of a public black female subtextivity. (1990: 4)

Both white feminists and white men had problems with the ‘negative’ they perceived in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. For the female audience, this film exposed sensitivities to images of women as sexual beings. We would like to imagine ourselves and, if we are feminists, all our sisters, as elegant, autonomous sexual creatures with the power of allure, but an allure which does not degrade. Images of prostitution are a visceral attack on this ideal, as well as on the difficult struggle to overcome the insidious sexual power struggle between men and women which we lose every time rape or assault against women occurs.

The ‘ideologically correct’ feminist line on O’Rourke’s film is that it should not have been made, it should not be shown, it exploits women etc. It is not so ironic that the men who have seen the film are also very edgy although they state different reasons.

As Michele Wallace has asked:

> white men but rather as effective cultural expressions of the reification of desire, or even as compelling critiques of dominant ideologies of family and sexuality? (1990:4)

The debate about this film was taken up largely by women, yet the filmic style addresses itself to a discussion of the male gaze as consciously represented by O’Rourke. Could the image of white Australian men portrayed in the film—ugly, drunk, lurching from one Thai woman to the next, or buying a child—be too ‘negative’? It is diametrically opposed to the image which so many Australian males, who would have seen the film, have of themselves.

Because O’Rourke’s film does not resolve the problem of the ‘male’ (for O’Rourke himself as well as the sex tourists), the male audience is left the task of trying to say something—and that, at this stage, is just too difficult. To be forced to identify with those lecherous yobbo and declare some similarity with them is to be forced to recognize and state—in public—some of the really ugly things about being an Australian male.

The appeals for such films as *Syron’s* and O’Rourke’s to be refused funding, or to be boycotted, presents a serious difficulty for a critique of representation. As John von Sturmer has written:

> Every act of representation involves a positioning of the self: each act of representation is an act of self-representation. Control of representation is more or less nothing other than censorship. Claims of the right to represent are more or less nothing other than claims of the right to censor... (1989: 128)

Censorship and censorial debate are denials of our right and our capacity to explore and change our alienated and/or colonised selves and the discourse which continues to mystify our conditions.
Section Four: Cultural Specificity in Aesthetics and Production

Remote Australia

The concerns, aesthetics and production values in films by Aboriginal people made for the big screen are not those of remote Aboriginal people. The work of Michaels and the Warlpiri Media Association is the primary source of information and arguments in this section which discusses cultural specificity in aesthetics and production. This work is unique in addressing how Warlpiri people at Yuendumu make video and television, and the specific Aboriginal cultural modes of sociality which are brought to bear in these endeavours.

Yuendumu is an Aboriginal settlement on the edge of the Tanami Desert in Central Australia. Founded as a Baptist Mission in 1943, it has been self-governing since 1978. Five hundred to one thousand people reside there, depending on the season. There is a community store, a town office, a police station, a primary school, a health clinic, a church, an art association and, most recently, a local television relay and broadcast facility.

On the surface, Yuendumu is a desolate ‘fourth world’ settlement of concrete block ‘houses’, windswept red soil, minimal employment, poor diet and health. But there is a strong determination by the Warlpiri people to survive, to fight back, to retain a heritage of great antiquity and continuity.

In his work, Michaels highlights the need to understand the process of incorporation: how the Warlpiri actually socialise Western things. Further, he argues that the problem with introduced technology, in this case instruments of mass communication such as television, goes beyond the problem of representation ethics.
The production values of remote Aboriginal video producers must be examined in their specific historical, social, cultural and technological context. The introduction of television services to remote Australia, particularly to Aboriginal communities, and the development of government policy in this regard, has been driven largely by the concerns of technocrats.

This has been problematic and objectionable for Aboriginal communities. Michaels' work shows why the social considerations, which are inherent to the introduction of video and television technology, should not be ignored or marginalised.

Video cassettes and VCRs were the only realistic technological options at Yuendumu in the early 1980s. They opened up possibilities for Warlpiri representation and power over production and transmission technology.

In his first ethnographic report, Michaels (1983b) explains the economic logic which later led to the community's decision to transmit a 'pirate' television service to meet its needs. The control which Europeans exerted over Aboriginal access to video cassettes was based in the relations between blacks and whites in the region.

Most of the tapes coming into the community came through Europeans, because Alice Springs rental agencies were reluctant to service remote Aborigines... (1986a: 40-44)

The Europeans made considerable profits, and also controlled content, whether for their own entertainment and advantage or to advance their own aims in Aboriginal policy. They believed that Aborigines preferred action/adventure films, especially highly violent ones. Michaels found to the contrary that the most popular tapes were those by and about Aboriginal people which were not available from commercial Alice Springs outlets.

He estimated roughly the costs of video supplies to Aboriginal residents of Yuendumu during 1983 at a total of $18,450. In 1986, he estimated that an individual might spend $5,000 in one year to maintain a VCR and to obtain cassettes. The usual lifespan of a VCR was not longer than a year because of the harsh physical conditions and the Aboriginal exchange system. He calculated that $18,450 may therefore represent a more generalisable annual estimate than it first appears to be.

The sociality of video cassette use among Warlpiri people can be seen as the precursor to the social organisation of television production, transmission and reception at Yuendumu. Michaels wrote:

The sociometry and demography of the Yuendumu camp layout is therefore an expression of many aspects of social structure, and an individual's home camp is one place one can be assured of standing in the correct relationship to people and place. So camp audiences are comprised of people who not only prefer to be together, but are appropriately assembled. (1983b: 8)

The Yuendumu store, in line with its general mark-up pricing policy, charged $2,000 for a receiver VCR system which was not particularly suitable for remote needs. There was a community trade network of video cassettes. Its logic reflected not only the sharing of scarce media resources, but also the preference of people to remain in certain groupings. As Michaels said, it was more appropriate for the video cassette to come to the home camp than to view it in someone else's camp.

VCR's were also exchanged according to Warlpiri cultural, social, political and financial factors. The question 'who owns a VCR' was, therefore, an ambiguous one:

To selfishly guard personal property violates all the rules of etiquette, and a person who acts thus may find himself excluded from social life and identity. He may even be accused of acting like a whitefella and given the manner in which money moves around the community through loans,
games, obligations and so forth, the claim that anything bought with money is the sole property of its purchaser is reasonably questionable. (1983b: 10)

The most popular video cassettes which had not entered the exchange system were those that community members had made of their own community as part of funded video production projects. These cassettes raised questions of ownership, distribution and viewing which had not been resolved at that time.

These factors led to the reconsideration of video cassette usage in the community.

The development of the video rental system was the critical impetus to VCR sales in European societies. By comparison, the notion of renting seems entirely inappropriate in a society which deemphasizes private ownership and emphasizes reciprocal kinship-based obligations, where the value of ownership implies the obligation to share. The very thing which makes VCRs commercially attractive to European society limits their usefulness to Aboriginals. (1983b: 11)

Thus transmitted television became the obvious alternative for the Warlpiri in overcoming the cultural and financial limitations of video rental. Transmitted television was far more appropriate to the Yuendumu situation because receivers could be purchased relatively cheaply, would not require additional outlay for software and were less susceptible to damage.

Some Warlpiri people expressed concerns about the impending introduction of rebroadcast national and commercial television from metropolitan centres. They feared it threatened their culture in various ways, particularly because a daily stream of imported programming would undervalue and limit the local cultural traditions and the control which had been possible to some extent with the video production and exchange. Loss of control of scheduling and program content was equated with loss of control of culture.

While European colonisation destroyed whole segments of traditional Aboriginal information networks, these still function in some areas, especially through the Centre, Top End and the northwest. Anthropologists have noted the transmission of cults along these networks, and the place of communications technology, including Toyotas, radios and video, in restoring and facilitating traditional information exchanges such as ceremonies. (Michaels 1986a:5)

The technological solution was a low-frequency, low-power transmitter which would allow the community to select from a variety of programming sources: locally produced and imported videotapes as well as satellite-delivered programs. The cost of the system was less than the community spent on video supplies in one year. It also allowed more people to afford receivers and assured them programming without purchasing a VCR or tapes. In fact, it solved the software problem and retained community control. (Michaels 1983b: 12-13)

Production values based on traditional social organisation

From the beginning of Warlpiri video production at Yuendumu, the range of content included: traditional ceremonies; dancing and manufacture of traditional implements; 'message sticks' or taped messages; editing of 'direct cinema' such as the Coniston massacre; educational videos; travel tapes; information about outstations; oral histories and stories; public relations tapes for Europeans; and art tapes, including catalogues of paintings and documentaries to be displayed at art galleries associated with the Warlukurlangu Artists Association.

According to Michaels and Kelly (1984: 26-34), the purpose of the video production of a version of the Coniston massacre was as
an explanation of the single most telling history of Warlpiri encounters with Europeans. It concerned events following the murder by two Japangka brothers of the prospector and dingo trapper, Frederick Brooks, at Crown Creek near Coniston station in 1928.

Michaels found that the videoing process involved an entire kinship group all related in various ways to the Coniston story and to the land on which it was to be filmed. These people, although never on camera, effectively authorised the filming of the story and assured its credibility to Warlpiri audiences.

Later, Jupurrula, acting as director and cameraman, provided a purposive explanation for every motion of his camera: ‘This is where those policemen came over that hill’, ‘that is where dreamtime figures are in that tree’, and ‘this is the track old Japangka came round’. For the Warlpiri cameraman, (and presumably the Warlpiri viewers), the camera was tracking inhabitants of the landscape, historical and mythical figures who resided there but were not apparent to normal vision.

Michaels found that ‘the dominant reading for Aboriginal audiences has to do with patrilineal rights to stories and restrictions on speaking about the dead’. Hence ‘the presence of the protagonist’s grandsons, who may have more ‘rights’ to the story than the son, authorises its retelling as well as underscoring the continuity of tradition’.

For Michaels, the fact that twenty-seven people turned up to make a film that featured only three people and required only two operators, recalled the ritual situation in which the relationship between kirda (owners of the land) and kurdungurlu (managers of the land) required each to assist the other in observing ritual matters to do with land.

In particular, kirda for this story were in the Japangardi/ Japangka semi-patrimoity. It was not incidental that Jupurrula, the cameraman, was in a kurdungurlu (managerial) relationship to the elder and to other people represented at the videoing. When Michaels asked why others who turned up and had witnessed the massacre did not appear on camera, Jupurrula said: ‘They’re kurdungurlu. They want to stay on the side for this story.’ In other words, in videomaking, as in religious ritual, the cult structures still had to be observed. The kurdungurlu (managers) were required to stand back and witness and instruct the kirda (owners of the land) on their performance.

In all reports from Warlpiri country, the camera and camera person are attributed with the ritual role of manager of the land. They are perceived to be kurdungurlu for events, because they are witnesses to events and affirm their truth. Michaels reported that women dancers at Yuendumu have directed a cameraperson to physically replace the Kurdungurlu on the dancing ground, and in the taping of ceremonies, senior people have insisted that only kurdungurlu (managers), not kirda (owners), can operate the camera.

As Michaels wrote:

...there is no necessary translation from orality to electronics; we are seeing instead an experimental phase involving the insertion of the camera into the social organisation of events. The point is the necessity of locating such a position for the camera. (1986a:65)

Image production is a good example of how western technology and artefacts have been incorporated as part of Aboriginal customary law. There are rules, which are somewhat flexible, for the production, distribution and ownership of any image, just as there are under traditional law for sacred designs which emanate from the Dreaming and refer to ancestors and ancestral mythology.

In relation to the production of acrylic art depicting traditional ritual designs, Michaels argued that there are features which distin-
guish Warlpiri art and design—or image—production from European production. These features are as significant in the production of video images as they are in acrylic art.

Aboriginal art does not emphasise original creative individuals or assign them responsibility as author. ‘Instead of an ideology of creative authority, there is an ideology of reproduction...art masks inventiveness and authorial intent,’ he wrote. Warlpiri artists earn rights to paint certain pre-existing designs, not so much to introduce new ones. Rights to an *oeuvre* are inherited, so that one’s son, daughter-in-law, or some other individual continues producing the same designs. The details of this system are complex. Therefore, as Michaels explained:

> ...plagiarism is impossible in Western Desert painting...A forgery adequately executed, when circulated, may be no forgery. (1988: 61)

What is feared, instead, is thievery: the unauthorised appropriation of a design, as well as the potential for such stolen designs to convey rights and authority to the thief. He concludes that:

> These design traditions are considered to originate in a collective past, and project towards an infinite, impersonal future. By necessity, the authority of this system would be compromised by an ideology of invention which singled out individual producers. (1988: 61)

The process of videotaping the Coniston massacre story illustrates that these principles underwrite the culture and politics of video and television production by the Warlpiri *about* themselves. There is not the western subject/object relationship in Warlpiri video representations of their world. Even the camera itself is attributed with an explicit Warlpiri social role consistent with the obligations of Warlpiri men and women to the Jukurrpa, the Law of the Dreaming which informs human social relationships and relationships with the environment. There is a subject/object relationship but one which is radically modified by the Warlpiri dialectic. The dialectic is that of the Warlpiri moiety system.

*Negotiation of cultural values in co-productions*

Warlpiri people have a long history as media subjects. Since the 1950s, films have been made by ethnographers, officials from education departments and documentary and television teams. With the influx of VCRs, they had the opportunity to review and consider the effects of this filmmaking, and to discover that they did not wish to be film subjects without any control or determination of the representations made of them.

Their specific objections were particular as well as universal. Michaels observed:

> The public display of private and restricted ceremonies is intolerable. The showing of pictures of people who have died violates traditional law and is an insult. And the more subtle rhetorical stance of many productions, and the inaccurate or disrespectful BBC style narrations are no longer taken as merely funny. (1987: 3)

To deal with the problems which the white film gaze presented for their culture, the Warlpiri devised important interventions.

When commercial and ABC crews asked to cover the annual Yuendumu sports weekend, which the press dubbed ‘the Black Olympics’, the Warlpiri Media Association demanded and negotiated written contracts.


Warlpiri media workers had recognised that imported professional media would remain necessary for any mass distribution. Their own footage was technically unacceptable for national transmis-
sion according to broadcasting standards. High band, high resolution recording and editing costs hundreds of thousands of dollars and was out of the reach of a small, impoverished Aboriginal community. In addition, media workers did not wish to leave their own community and culture to acquire the necessary ‘professional’ broadcast skills available only at institutions in the cities.

Of the three hundred hours of tape produced during the first three years of video production at Yuendumu, the ‘location shoot’ with the ABC was the first made specifically to communicate with outsiders. As Michaels observed, ‘Yuendumu videomakers rarely make videos in English, or for European audiences. They prefer to stick to their speciality, Aboriginal media for Aboriginal people’.

It was this event which brought to the forefront the severe problems of cultural interface which film presented for particular Warlpiri traditions:

Community review is the minimum condition the Warlpiri insist on. What would happen if anybody filmed and an image of the deceased were broadcast? It would be more than shame for the family, it would be trouble and fights for those who lived by traditional law. And what if they had made a mistake and accidentally taken pictures of something sacred, or something private? Or maybe not accidentally; the Warlpiri are beginning to understand what even lay Europeans don’t, that you can appear to be filming one thing, but focus over somebody’s shoulder and film something else. Who in Sydney would be able to prevent such violations from going to air and causing trouble in the community? Perhaps we could volunteer our services to help in post-production and review the film in the process. (1987: 9)

The ABC TV Features Department, in the end, refused to negotiate on the crucial issue of community review. The Yuendumu community responded with an injunction to prevent the airing of the program until it was reviewed. The ABC refused on the grounds that no such agreement had been legally contracted, despite the impression of the Warlpiri negotiators that they had made their demands clear. Further, the Corporation would not compromise its ‘editorial freedom’. In fact, as Michaels observed,

...Indeed no policy regarding Aboriginal traditions, or appropriate procedures for working in traditional communities, exist at the Corporation (1987: 12)

Since copyright had not been assigned, the community agreed to forgo copyright or legal action in order to review the footage. The ABC’s researcher was flown to Yuendumu, the community approved the program, and it went to air on 28 August 1985.

Along with the developments in their own television station, this incident empowered the Warlpiri to reconsider the place of religious traditions as video subjects. This will be discussed in Section Five.

Location and land rights

Traditional Aboriginal land owners may call upon their own customary law and Australian law to restrict the use of Aboriginal land as the location in film and video production, in line with cultural, social or other concerns.

At least in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people are protected by the legal safety net of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Commonwealth) and the Aboriginal Land Act (Northern Territory) which empowers them to veto any use of their land and, if they agree, to set the terms and conditions of any use of that land.

The Northern Land Council has formalised the relationship between traditional Aboriginal land owners and the filmmaking and television world in its jurisdiction under the terms of this legislation.
This takes the form of a protocol for films shot on location on Aboriginal land, entitled *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner in Arnhem Land*? (Mackinolty and Duffy, 1987: 1).

The protocol was partly developed in response to the negotiations over filming parts of *Crocodile Dundee II* in Arnhem Land. The traditional owners had reacted to the making of *Crocodile Dundee I* about which Australian writer and critic Meaghan Morris, wrote:

>Crocodile Dundee is a post-colonial comedy of survival, with remnants of the British, land-taking, appropriative regime (bushmen, Aborigines, Darwinian 'natural' perils) emerging into the 'multinational' cultural space of American-media modernity. (1988: 244)

Morris's most acute comments relate to the film's assertion that ‘Aborigines do not own the land, they belong to it’, a line delivered by the character Mick Dundee. This is a mumbo jumbo determinist position recently overturned in the Mabo case in which the High Court found that native title continues to exist in a range of circumstances. As Morris observed:

>...Dundee takes the place of Aboriginal opinion (also construing it as unconflicted). While implying that land rights politics of reappropriation is un-Aboriginal, he discursively appropriates the right to Aboriginal speech. Of course any enunciative shift 'appropriates': appropriation in this sense is neither displaced identity, nor colonialist invasion, but a process that takes place in both: the discursive struggle for power to fix the terms of reference. The terms are fixed on this occasion with homely reference to the timeless land, a dog with two fleas squabbling over ownership. Aboriginal land claims, however, are not made for The Land in general, but for particular sites. Dundee effaces this distinction in a discourse on (European) romantic Nature: and confirms its supremacy by casually throttling a snake. (1988: 259)

Traditional owners negotiated a location contract with the *Crocodile Dundee* producers. However, there were inevitable problems when crews treated their land like a caravan park at the end of the universe.

In the protocol, and the location contracts to which it refers, Aboriginal people have demonstrated that they can set standards at the production stage, even if the intercultural dialogue goes on in terms which only serve to restrict 'Aboriginality' images to mumbo jumbo, buffoonery and cartoonish caricatures. As Mackinolty and Duffy explain:

>Each year the Northern, Central, Tiwi and Pitjantjarara Land Councils receive something in the order of 400 approaches from filmmakers to film on Aboriginal land and/or with Aboriginal people. Every week, one or other of the land councils receives an approach something along these lines:

>"We’ve just had this fantastic idea for a doco-drama. It’s all about how this white woman living on an Aboriginal community falls in love with an Aboriginal man. We’ve got the script and finance all wrapped up and all we need is a good community to get into..."

The film industry has interpreted Aboriginal rights to control entry to their lands as confrontational. In public objections to the protocol’s screening process, some producers have threatened Aboriginal land rights by resorting to crude media attacks on traditional owners who own the potential ‘locations’. As the authors of *Guess Who’s Coming To Dinner in Arnhem Land* point out:

>This permit system means, among other things, that filmmakers are no longer allowed to simply walk into Aboriginal communities with cameras and shoot at will.

>However, this newly won power is under constant political attack from a range of forces including the film industry. While the white nomads of the mining and tourist industries push at the frontiers of Aboriginal land, filmmakers are following... During the days of Native Welfare, filmmakers and journalists were banned from Aboriginal reserve lands. Now, while the re-establishment of Aboriginal lands has been a victory, it has brought in its wake increased external pressures on Aboriginal people and their land. (Mackinolty and Duffy, 1987:2)
During the making of *Crocodile Dundee II*, traditional owners were attacked for being greedy, for seeking payment from filmmakers who wished to use their land and, it was argued, for being 'obstructive towards the film industry'. The Northern Land Council replied:

**Obstructive to whom?**

In this, as in so many cases, a major element of the film depended on its location on Aboriginal land. The traditional owners didn’t *ask* for the film to be made; they didn’t *ask* for sets to be built that used Aboriginal rock paintings as backdrops. On the contrary, the tremendous profits generated by *Crocodile Dundee I* substantially increased the need for exotic Aboriginal locations for the success of its sequel. Indeed, Aboriginal land was necessary to lend reality to an otherwise palpably absurd storyline.

So, when traditional owners assessed the utility value of their land to the makers of *Crocodile Dundee II* at a mere 0.04% of the proceeds of the first *Dundee* movie, they were condemned as 'destroyers' of the film industry.

No public comment was made about the obstruction to the use and enjoyment of the land for its traditional owners by filmmakers during the month-long shoot.

In their attacks on traditional owners, the *Dundee* producers were singularly quiet about the $2,000 an hour they paid for the use of a New York pub in the first production.

The reality is that Aboriginal land is often regarded by many people as having no intrinsic value. It becomes valuable only after non-Aboriginal people can work out an angle on farming, mining or, indeed, filming it. Why, then, should Aboriginal people derive monetary benefit from the land when they do nothing with it? They don’t develop its resources, after all...

Using a big budget example such as *Dundee* is not as unreasonable as it sounds to a section of the Australian industry that is rarely so heavily financed. However, if that is what happens at the top of the industry, it is not surprising that there is similar disregard for Aboriginal land at other ends of the filmmaking world. (Mackinolty and Duffy, 1987:2)

After discussing the politics of representation and the ‘It’s my movie and you’ll cry if I want you to’ mode of filmmaking, the Northern Land Council document sets out the kinds of conditions sought by the land councils on behalf of traditional owners and the reasons:

This ‘third party’ negotiation role of the land councils ensures two things. First, it ensures privacy for Aboriginal communities, and acts as a buffer against pressures from the more predatory style of filmmaker. This is not dissimilar to the way in which communities can have an arms length approach to mining companies. Second, communities have access to commercial, legal and technical assistance and advice through which informed decisions can be made. (Mackinolty and Duffy, 1987:2)

Because of the importance of the Northern Land Council’s strategic intervention in relation to Aboriginal content or location in film and television production, the full text of this protocol is provided in the Appendix.
Section Five: The Case Study of Jardiwarnpa

How the Warlpiri approached their cultural restrictions on representation

The representation of Warlpiri fire ceremonies in film and video, with particular reference to Jardiwarnpa directed by independent filmmaker Ned Lander and co-produced by Rachel Perkins of SBS TV, highlights the intricate negotiations between Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal filmmakers or video producers in relation to content which is normally restricted from general viewing in the Aboriginal milieu. (This author was commissioned by City Pictures to write the script for the film.)

Michaels laid some of the foundations for these negotiations in his Primer on Restrictions on Picture-Taking in Traditional Areas of Aboriginal Australia which was the first clear statement of Aboriginal rules on authority over images and the rights to representation.

His involvement in the 1980s video production of a Warlpiri fire ceremony (restricted from showing for a period) made it possible for Lander and Perkins to negotiate a co-production of the Jardiwarnpa Fire Ceremony in 1992.

The ceremony is a statement of Aboriginal ownership of land. The ritual itself draws people together along 'songlines' which stretch from Central Australia to Port Keats on the northern coast. This is a story of survival from the world's oldest living culture.

People in the community refer to the ceremonial language as 'hard' Warlpiri as opposed to the 'soft' or easy language of daily life. The term 'hard' refers to the esoteric, high language of ceremony and ceremonial knowledge. As the songs of the ceremony are set pieces, they maintain elements of the language, and of the religious philosophy, which may otherwise disappear. The filming of the ceremony
is a powerful assertion of the maintenance and renewal of Warlpiri law and culture.

There is some historical background to the desire among Warlpiri people for a high quality film on the Jardiwampa ceremony. It dates back to the ethnographic film, *A Warlpiri Fire Ceremony—Ngatjakula*, made by Roger Sandall in 1967 in another Warlpiri community, Lajamanu, some hundreds of kilometres north west of Yuendumu. This film documented the Buluwandi Fire Ceremony performed by the opposite moiety. Sandall was assisted by anthropologist, Nicolas Peterson.

The fire ceremony is one of the great traditions of the Warlpiri and was once widespread among the other language groups of Central Australia. It is described in the literature as early as 1904 by Spencer and Gillen who witnessed this ritual performed by Waramungu people at Tennant Creek in 1901. In the words of Spencer and Gillen, ‘its object was to finally settle up old quarrels and to make the men friendly disposed towards one another’. (1904: 392)

Like other religious traditions, its celebration is founded on the exploits of ancestral beings, of Jardiwampa (the Snake) and Yankirri (the Emu). The Snake is of the Jakamarra/Jupurrurla semipatrimoiet, and the Emu is of the Jampijinpa/Jangala semipatrimoiet.

Yuendumu is on the path of the great journeys which these beings made. Along their tracks are places sacred to the Warlpiri and other Aboriginal people. The journeys of Jardiwampa and the Yankirri, and the places they visited, are celebrated in the songs and dances of this particular fire ceremony named after the Snake. This is one of the bodies of knowledge conferring ownership of land and governing Warlpiri society. The places visited and the activities performed by the ancestral being are recreated and represented in dances, body designs and sand paintings.

Peterson’s text of 1970, an anthropological analysis, is widely agreed to be the most authoritative explanation of the ritual. He describes it as a ceremony for the resolution of conflict, referring to the pattern of niece exchange among men as the structural basis for the aggrieved to seek public acknowledgement of their rights. Other grievances, not so much to do with wife bestowal but with other obligations between the parties, both ritual and mundane, may also be aired and settled by this ceremony.

As explained by Peterson, the ceremony does not concern any fire totem, but rather the name refers to the spectacular use of fire. Of all the public ceremonies or public sequences of Warlpiri ceremony, this is the most visually spectacular. Fire, a powerful and polysemic symbol in the Warlpiri iconography, has the special significance of ritual cleansing as, for instance, in the practice of seasonal burning of tracts of land. There is also a more esoteric significance as becomes apparent in the polysemic of symbols which appear in the ceremony, and in the paintings and dances.

In Sandall’s ethnographic film of the Buluwandi Fire Ceremony, Peterson’s authoritative anthropologist voice explains to the audience the meaning of each major ceremonial action, rather in the style of David Attenborough. There is no sync dialogue from the community members, only singing and bits of voices.

There are many ethnographic films of this kind held in the Film Archive of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, many of them made by Sandall. Most are completely restricted from public viewing. They were made during the era when it was sincerely believed that Aboriginal cultures were disappearing, and when the aim was to document rituals such as the fire ceremonies and others which form the core of Aboriginal religious expression. John von Sturmer has questioned ethnographic filmmakers who purport to objectively record information from another culture:
Some of them seem to sit there waiting for the truth to suddenly unfold itself before the lens of their camera, while others seek to impose, more often than not unconsciously, their own narrative. There are also those who require the participation of their 'subjects'. But while it is reasonable to assume that the truth of a society is to be found embodied in each of its members (how could it be otherwise?), it is quite another matter to assume that any of them has the capacity to enunciate in filmic terms the truth of their own condition or that of their own society. It involves an act of translation, an imaginative recreation invoked and unleashed by the potentialities of the medium. Truth may be there in every moment of lived reality, of actuality, but fiction alone provides the mechanism for the expression of truth. (1989: 134-135)

In 1984, when Michaels showed Sandall’s ethnographic film to the elders, interest was regenerated in performing the ceremony. Two years later, Andrew Japaljarri Spencer made a new low-band video recording of a performance near Yuendumu of the Warlpiri Fire Ceremony for the Warlpiri Media Association.

By 1988, the elders were concerned that with the death of many older members of the community, it was more important than ever to have a record. Both the Japaljarri Spencer version and the Sandall version had become restricted from public viewing because of the deaths of participants and the showing of particular totemic designs. There is a general ban on seeing or naming deceased persons within a certain period after their death. Usually, only senior initiated men or senior Law women could view these productions. Only they have the authority to look at images of people who have died and of sacred designs and to permit their showing to wider audiences. The Sandall version is now back in limited circulation because sufficient time has passed since the deaths of participants.

The elders still needed a version of the Jardiwarnpa Fire Ceremony to show to novices so that the religious and cultural traditions could be passed on to the next generation. In any case, the public sequences of the fire ceremony could be shown to the uninitiated and to the general public.

Another consideration was the fact that the Warlpiri in the opposite moiety who performed the Buluwandi Fire Ceremony for Sandall, had a version which had been edited for public showing. The performers of the Jardiwarnpa ceremony wanted a public version to demonstrate their own cultural strength. Indeed, it was inevitable that the ‘law be balanced’ and a production of the Jardiwarnpa ceremony be made. Thus the two halves of society as represented by the moiety division would have equal filmic representation.

The Warlpiri Media Association approached Lander and Perkins to film Jardiwarnpa. The ensuing negotiations led to interesting contractual, investment and copyright arrangements. The issues of finance and copyright were complicated, but an agreement was reached which was satisfactory to all parties: the men and women of Yuendumu with the ritual authority for the ceremony; the producers; and the main funding bodies, the Warlpiri Artists Association, Warlukurlangu, and the Australian Film Finance Corporation.

The Warlukurlangu Artists Association invested in the production because of the relevance of the Snake Dreaming to a particularly significant acrylic art piece which will be exhibited in Germany. Like other significant investors, they were in a position to shape the relationship with the filmmakers and to make certain demands.

The elders arranged the ceremony for this film in locations from Wirnparku to Minjirr Minjirrp—Mt Leibig to Mission Creek.

The agreement involved a number of features which further empowered the Warlpiri, demonstrating that the co-production model is an important intervention for Aboriginal people in film-
and videomaking with Aboriginal content.

There was consultation, for instance, with the community about what content would be shown in the international and domestic versions of the Jardiwarnpa made for television.

Senior kurdungurlu, the ritual managers, were appointed to supervise and guide the crew, to review the material and to participate in the editing. The ritual performers were listed and arrangements were made among them for appropriate payments. The community also contributed food and other logistic material.

Long Paddy and other senior kirda and kurdungurlu were the first to see the material.

Constant viewing and screening of the material took place at the old Warlukurlangu building because no-one had died in the vicinity recently. The tracks leading in and out of the grounds were open and the building had doors on each side so people could leave to comply with kinship avoidance relationships. Cassettes were also circulated in the community and aired through the television transmitter so that viewings could take place at people’s houses.

Thus the traditional subject/object relations in film production, as exemplified in much ethnographic filmmaking, were avoided. As Michaels observed on the debate about ethnographic film:

There was a discourse on power here, signalled and enforced by the politics of positioning of people as either before or behind the camera. (1986b: 13).

The production of a broadcast standard program such as Jardiwarnpa took up the challenge to turn the medium of television in the peoples’ favour. Indeed, as Michaels reported:

It was Japangkanga who responded to the prospect of satellite television, by saying ‘We can fight fire with fire’, making a reference to the traditional Warlpiri ritual, the Fire Ceremony. (1987: 23)

Section Six: Conclusion

Aboriginal people watch films and don’t like some of them

This essay is an attempt to stimulate debate on a theoretical and critical approach that could guide and inform the Australian Film Commission and other readers and policy-makers in the development of policies and programs to encourage Aboriginal production and distribution.

In Section Two I argued that ‘Aboriginality’ was a social thing in the Durkheimian sense. It arises from the experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book.

‘Aboriginality’ is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’ so that in the infinite array of intercultural experiences, there might be said to be three broad categories of intersubjectivity.

The first is the experience of the Aboriginal person interacting with other Aboriginal people in social situations located largely within Aboriginal culture. The second is the stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people. The third is the construction generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, where the individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension.

The Warlpiri video production of the Coniston massacre story can be seen as an example of the first category of intersubjectivity.
whose Aboriginal subjects create representations of their own ‘Aboriginality’. Aboriginal people interact with other Aboriginal people in social situations located largely within Aboriginal culture. However, these events are never closed or pristine. In the case of the Coniston massacre story, the use of Western technology such as video cameras and the observation of the events by the anthropologist, Michaels, are signs that the events also took place in a global context.

The capacity of the Warlpiri to enunciate in filmic terms the truth of their own condition by writing their version of the Coniston massacre story provides us with a startling new text. An intertextual reading of the several versions of the massacre is now possible. Previous versions include the original official inquiry, some secondary accounts and primary oral accounts by the police tracker who still lives at Yuendumu.

The cultural theme in the Warlpiri video story explains motives and experience which are ignored in the other accounts. The story stands in stark contrast to the sympathetic accounts of more recent writers as well as the early inquiry’s whitewash of the police and vigilante parties who killed Law men and women of the particular descent group responsible for the ancestral beings which reside at places in the story.

The second category of intersubjectivity is exemplified by the representations of Aboriginal people and land in Crocodile Dundee I and II. Crocodile Dundee has virtually the same plot as the Tarzan story. Mick Dundee (Paul Hogan) is an apparently laconic Australian version of the Earl of Greystokes, and the New York journalist is the modern global remake of Jane.

The artistic interventions of individual video- and filmmakers—Moffatt, Deacon and Syron—and the television production on the Fire Ceremony, jardiwarnpa, fall into the third category; ‘Aboriginalities’ generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue. The dialogue may be heavy with history or cultural icons as the resonance of Jedda and Tarzan in filmic statements attests.

In these intersubjective exchanges, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals involved test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as responses are processed to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other.

It is in these dialogues that working models of ‘Aboriginality’ are constructed as ways of seeing Aboriginal people. Both the Aboriginal subject and the non-Aboriginal subject are participating. The results of this self-conscious dialogue are meanings and analyses which, ideally, do not mystify ‘race’ and other ideological concepts. Michaels observed that:

> There now may be far more willingness among a new generation of filmmakers...involved in a body of contemporary work in which their role as producers is no longer dominant, and where they seek to act as catalysts, providing conduits through which a more indigenous representation is possible. These relationships impose a new set of contradictions...I do not mean to suggest that handing the camera over to the subject automatically restores the subject and converts the process into a transparent act of auto-inscription. In fact, the working relationships between filmmakers and Aboriginal subjects which result from the intention of media self-management are diverse and have different success rates as judged from the perspective of either the participants or any given audience. Certainly the results vary, in the case of the video product, in their interest and accessibility to Europeans. (1986b: 14)

Some Aboriginal filmmakers will not challenge colonialist representation because of the power of the visual realm to conceal social and political conditions. Film and video can make invisible the racist and sexist import of the cultural material they re-present. The conventional styles and constructions of melodrama, documentary and other popular genres will continue to trap producers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in conventional racism and sexism.

But the question must be asked: should these insidious ways...
of insisting on racism, sexism and domination be funded by one of
the pre-eminent Australian film institutions?

Aboriginal people have invented a theatre of politics in which self-representation has become a sophisticated device, creating their own theories or models of intercultural discourse such as land rights, self-determination, 'White Australia has a black history' and so on. These are certainly more than catch-cries, or 'vague and negotiable signifiers', as von Strunen (1989: 128) has described them.

The complaint, 'This is all so tiresome and infantile; why do we have to listen to this chorus of 'I want', 'I demand'? ' is part of an intellectual malaise. Some intellectuals even demand that the Native answer back in a refereed journal, say something about the French intellectuals, Jacques Derrida or Jean Baudrillard, and speak from the hyperluxe of the first world with the reflective thoughts of a well-paid, well-fed, detached scholar.

The notion of social justice appears to have become boring and has disappeared from the rhetoric. But this, like the consumption and reconsumption of all ideas and styles including all that is regarded as 'the primitive', is a symptom of postmodernism and economic rationalism.

One of the major problems for the Australian Film Commission is to find the film- and videomakers and critical thinkers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who can assess both individual and community scripts and film and video proposals. Key criteria would include a knowledge of and sensibility towards Aboriginal cultural values and the impact of history. This requires that they demonstrate a capability to distinguish between colonial and anti-colonial representations of Aboriginal people.

In Aboriginal literature, especially in Writing from the Fringe, Mudrooroo Narogin has written a thesis on preserving Aboriginal cultural integrity. In film, video and television, as I have explained, the theoretical approach has barely begun. Without such approaches, Commission decisions to fund particular individual scripts and group projects will be merely shots in the dark.

The motivations behind Aboriginal community video production and television transmission can be seen as basic issues of self-determination, cultural maintenance and the prevention of cultural disruption.

Broadcasts of alien programming, whether Australian, American or British, constitute both a threat and an important information source to Aboriginal people. The strategies which indigenous Australian have employed to overcome the problems posed by the impact of television and video include: cultural and aesthetic interventions; control of incoming television signals; control of self-representation through local video production in local languages; refusal to permit outsiders to film; and negotiation of co-productions which guarantee certain conditions aimed at cultural maintenance.

An expansion of experimental film- and videomaking is vital to allow Aboriginal people to make their own self-representations and to create culturally useful meaning. Without a body of self-representative work there can be no self-critical assessment made and no meaningful discourse on Aboriginal aesthetics by Aborigines themselves.

Much Aboriginal aesthetic and artistic expression is guaranteed a secure place in Australian social, cultural and economic life and not just because much Aboriginal art is exportable, earning valuable dollars in the international market and tourism dollars at home. This applies to the visual arts, especially the acrylic paintings from the western desert and other regions and the bark paintings from Arnhem Land.

Aboriginal film and video output, however, must be financially nurtured because of the high cost of production. As in art and
literature, this means that the aesthetic and cultural values must be acknowledged and explained to larger audiences so that the endeavour is understood.

The Australian Film Commission may choose to identify and target particular areas rather than cover the whole range of production and distribution activity.

The argument about the Aboriginal subject is important to the relationships which the Commission develops as an agency of the state. Funding priorities and programs would be best identified by well-informed, frequent communication with community-based associations, organisations and individuals. This should enable the Commission to develop an on-going and long term relationship with the diverse Aboriginal film and video community.

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Appendix: The Northern Land Council Protocol

*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner in Arnhem Land?*

The areas that are considered by land council staff when assessing proposals vary, obviously depending on the nature of the project. The assessment process is designed to produce advice to communities, as well as assist, where possible, potential filmmakers. The following areas are considered:

*Whose Interest Does the Film Serve?* This would cover financial as well as political/cultural interests.

*Editorial Control.* This would cover control at both scripting stage as well as final audio-visual mix. It further covers the use of archival footage. Many things that filmmakers got away with filming back in the fifties, for example, are regarded as being quite unacceptable for public viewing by Aboriginal people.

*Distribution Control.* This covers both the physical distribution of the film/video as well as accompanying publicity. For example, due to prohibition rules among traditional groups about the viewing of images of deceased people, some groups have insisted on the right to restrict distribution within their own region (e.g. the Northern Territory) when participants die.

*Employment.* In addition to the usual industrial award conditions, complex rules as to ownership of songs, dances and country that may be depicted in a film/video, have meant some extra payments have been negotiated for people who don’t actually appear in the film. For example, in one notorious case some years ago, there was a twelve month dispute as to payment of rehearsal time for dancers in an Australian film, with the producers refusing to pay
senior custodians who rehearsed but didn’t perform on set.

Environment Issues. This is to ensure that the film/video has a
minimal impact on the environment, including compensation and
rehabilitation provisions in any agreement that is made.

Sacred Sites. This is to protect access to or activity on sacred
sites in the shooting area. Again, compensation and rehabilitation
provisions would be agreed to.

Legal. This area would cover both contractual arrangements
that might need to be reached between the filmmakers and partici-
pants, as well as the issues of copyright.

Finally, the land councils are not in the business of being
agents for the industry; our role is to act on the instructions of and
provide advice and assistance to traditional owners. Therefore, if
owners refuse access, or refuse to reach an agreement suitable to the
filmmakers, the land councils are not in the business of coercing our
constituents.

Similarly, the land councils expect that filmmakers will respect
the right of traditional owners through the land councils to say ‘no’
to their proposals. The land councils for their part expect that
filmmakers will not set out to circumvent the procedures outlined
here, or apply direct pressure on individuals or communities to
‘agree’ to proposals.

Finally, the land councils are not travel agents or booking
agents. We cannot develop itineraries for filmmakers or line up a
community that suits their purposes. The land councils expect that,
as professionals, filmmakers will have the necessary research.

About the Author

Marcia Langton was born in Brisbane. After matriculating in 1968,
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She worked for the Aboriginal Medical Service from 1975 to 1977
and was elected General Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advance-
ment of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in 1977.

Marcia was a research officer in history at the Australian Institute
of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies from 1981 to 1984 and
is now Chair of the Institute’s Council. She served as a consultant on
customary law to the Australian Law Reform Commission in 1982. The
following year she prepared background papers on behalf of the National
Aboriginal Conference for the third general assembly of the World
Council of Indigenous Peoples and attended the United Nations Working
Group on Indigenous Populations as delegate of the Federation of
Aboriginal Land Councils. Marcia graduated with first class honours in
anthropology from the Australian National University, Canberra in 1984.

Between 1984 and 1989 she was Senior Anthropologist of the
Central Land Council in Alice Springs. She was appointed head of the
Aboriginal Issues Unit of the Northern Territory section of the Royal
Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1989 and then became
an Assistant Divisional Head in the Queensland Department of Family
Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

In 1991 and 1992 Marcia was a lecturer in Anthropology at
Macquarie University, Sydney. She took up a position as researcher on
Aboriginal land claims in Cape York early in 1993.

Throughout her career, Marcia has retained an interest in drama.
In 1976 she acted in the play ‘Here Comes the Nigger’ at the Black
Theatre. She played the leading role in Tracey Moffatt’s 1990 film Night
Cries—A Rural Tragedy, and has made television appearances in both
drama and documentary programs. Marcia has two children, Ben and
Ruby.