

Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists. **Marcia Langton**

In this major work of social and cultural criticism, Marcia Langton analyses the making and watching of films, videos and TV programs by Aboriginal people in remote and settled Australia. She introduces theoretical perspectives to investigate concepts of Aboriginality and presents case studies of films such as *Jedda*, Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries*, Brian Syron's *Jindalee Lady* and Ned Lander and Rachel Perkin's film of the Warlpiri Fire Ceremony *Jardiwarra*.

The central requirement, she argues, is to develop a body of knowledge on representation of Aboriginal people and their concerns in art, film, television or other media and a critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, drawing from Aboriginal world views, from Western traditions and from history. This essay makes a significant contribution to that task.

'Sometimes I feel like beating up those white Australian cultural experts who tell us how to have fun... whether our cultural production is worthy or worthless... Marcia Langton speaks out again—but this time to us.' **Destiny Deacon**

'Marcia ... shows us that the relationship between Aboriginal people and the wider community can be examined critically and thoughtfully in films and that the visual portrayal of people can show relations of power. This insight can be the impetus for building new relationships based on recognition and respect and aiming for true reconciliation.' **Patrick Dodson**, Chairperson, Aboriginal Reconciliation Unit

'Marcia's essay is critique in the best sense of the term.' **Annette Hamilton**, Professor of Anthropology, Macquarie University

'... makes an eloquent case for the abandonment of ... fashionable but dangerous prescriptive notions of who has a 'right' to say what about whom.' **Dennis O'Rourke**



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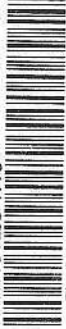
Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...*

essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things.



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

An essay for the
Australian Film Commission
on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking
by and about Aboriginal people and things

by Marcia Langton



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Front cover photo: production still from the second story 'Choo Choo Choo' in Tracey Moffatt's feature film *Bedevil*. Actors: Banula Marika, Tracey Moffatt and baby Christine Byers. Still by Elise Lockwood. Courtesy Anthony Buckley Productions.

Back cover photo courtesy Alana Harris.

* Title from Yothu Yindi, 'Treaty', written by M. Yunupingu, P. Kelly, G. Yunupingu, M. Mununggurr, S. Kellaway, C. Williams, W. Marika, P. Garrett (Mushroom Music).

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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',

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

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.

Annette Hamilton
Professor of Anthropology
Macquarie University

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,
December, 1992.

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 Jakamarra, Gordon Bennett, Trevor Nickolls, Rover Thomas, Jimmy Pike, Fiona Foley, Ron Hurley, Sally Morgan, Pansy Napangarti and Emily Nkgwarreye. 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 Nyuringu*).

The community of Borroolooka co-produced *Two Laws*, while the Warlukurlangu Artists Co-operative and the Yuendumu community recently participated in the production of the *Jardiwarmpa* 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 Warlpiri 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 predated 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 strategic 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 *Filmviews* interview, David Noakes explained that he gradually came in contact with Aboriginal people and began teaching video to them. He worked on *Munda Nyuringu* (1983), a film co-produced by Robert Bropho, Jan Roberts and Martha Ansara and *Milliya Rumarra/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 Nyuringu* 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 [*Miliya Rumarral/Brand 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 conference 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, mikes, 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 licensees 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 licensee 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. (Mackinoly and Duffy 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 Arrhem 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 Kakadu's wetlands to the desert, as well as Kurdaitja men, medicine men, and tjuringas from Central Australia combined with didjiridus from Arnhem Land. The main protagonist, of course, was a sympathetic white female anthropologist divorcee 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. (Mackinoly 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.

Section Two: The Politics of Aboriginal Representation

The involvement of Aboriginal people in the making of film and video has increased at 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.