

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 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 Willemen calls 'ventriloquism') 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 *Jedda* 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 senses 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 Aborigines 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 scholar, 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', 'octeroon', '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 ideas 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 Herodotus 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 Yimidjirr, 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 Yimidjirr 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 Aboriginals that Australians 'know' are Bennelong, Jeddah and Marbuk in Chauvel's *Jeddah*, Bony, or the characters of Ion Idrot, the Goolagong rebel, Jandewarra. Like these fictional characters, Evonne Goolagong (not the actual Mrs Cawley), Senator Neville Bonner, Governor Doug Nicholls (known more popularly as Pastor Long) 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 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?' Usually 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 Lays* 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 constitute 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 *resentiment*. 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 Aborigines 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:

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 handknit 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)

... '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.

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.

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 discomfiting and, I would argue, a conservative restraint on Aboriginal creativity.