

Whose Dreaming? Intercultural appropriation, representations of Aboriginality, and the process of film-making in Werner Herzog's *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1983)¹

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Abstract

In 1983, the German film-maker Werner Herzog realized a decade-long ambition to create a film thematizing the struggles of Aboriginal groups against mining companies in Northern Australia. Where the Green Ants Dream (1984) was ultimately reviled by Australian pundits and also disappointed international critics. However, the film and the story behind its making raise important issues, not only about the creative appropriation of Aboriginal mythology, and the filmic representation of Aboriginality and of the struggle for Aboriginal land rights, but also about the intricacies of cross-cultural collaboration. This article reveals how Herzog relied upon the first land rights court case (Milirrpum v Nabalco) in writing his film script. In doing so, he came up with a hybrid ambiguously situated between documentary and feature film, something which proved uncomfortable for the lead Aboriginal actors Wandjuk and Roy Marika, who had both been players in Milirrpum v Nabalco. This article analyses Herzog's mix of documentary and fiction, examines the film's reception—both by white Australian critics and by Aboriginal Australians—and argues that, while the film may be flawed, it is valuable because it threw (and continues to throw) light on the processes and pitfalls of cross-cultural collaboration.

Keywords
German cinema
cross-cultural
collaboration
Aboriginal history
authorship
cross-cultural
protocols
documentation

Introduction

In recent years, a number of protocols governing the interaction between white film-makers and Indigenous communities have been drafted for bodies such as SBS Independent and the Australian Film Commission (Mackinolty and Duffy 1987; Bostock 1990 [1997]; Johnson 2001; Janke 2003; among others). These non-binding documents have focused on questions of respect and consultation during all stages from scriptwriting to post-production. Whilst they are to be commended at the level of principle, some doubt remains about their efficacy when translated into practice and about whether they might not also have unfortunate side effects. Frances Peters-Little has questioned, for example, whether requirements to involve

1. An earlier version of this article was included in the proceedings of the PASSAGES conference on law, aesthetics and politics held at the University of Melbourne on 13–14 July 2006 (see Hurley 2006b).

2. These early conflicts in the production process were also discussed by Therese Davis in the launch issue of *Studies in Australasian Cinema*.

'talent' in post-production might not be counter-productive given that they can heighten those persons' unease. She observes that the 'demand' that film-makers, writers and artists' work be approved by the Aboriginal community 'is almost impossible to meet' (Peters-Little 2002: 7). In making her point 'on the impossibility of pleasing everyone,' she 'can only hope that artists, black and white, will be able to continue to make commentary on Aboriginal life' and that 'they will become more innovative in their representations of Aboriginal people as human beings deserving of justice and constructive criticism' (Peters-Little 2002: 9).

The Adelaide film-maker Rolf de Heer's experience in making the award-winning *Ten Canoes*, as reflected upon in the excellent documentary *The Balanda and the Ten Canoes* (M. Reynolds, T. Nehme and R. de Heer, 2006), reinforces Peters-Little's point that '[d]eciding what benefits a community is not straightforward' (Peters-Little 2002: 8). In *The Balanda and the Ten Canoes*, we learn that de Heer's project was backed by some members of the Ramingining community who were in favour of the film as a way to gain the respect of white Australia, but that some others thought that he was 'just using' those Aborigines.² We also learn that during filming, one of the central actors, Mingululu, abandoned the project for never fully elaborated reasons that other members of the community thought 'too traditional.' It is only in the documentary that we come to understand a little more about the motives that the different parties had for making *Ten Canoes*, and about the various compromises and lessons that were involved for all. These are issues the intricacies of which are all-too-seldom aired.

Another feature film which involved an outsider working with an Aboriginal community, but which predates the protocols, was the German director Werner Herzog's 1983 film thematizing the land-rights struggle of traditional Aboriginal group against a mining company, *Where the Green Ants Dream*. This film was reviled by Australian pundits and also disappointed various international critics. However, it—and the story behind its making—raises similarly important issues to *The Balanda and the Ten Canoes*, not only about the compromises and lessons involved in making such a film, but also about the creative appropriation of Aboriginal mythology. This article analyses the genesis of Herzog's uneasy mix of documentary and fiction, re-examines the reception of the film—both by white Australian critics and by Aboriginal Australians—and argues that, while the film may be flawed, it is valuable because, like *The Balanda and the Ten Canoe*, it threw (and continues to throw) important issues into perspective, from which other film-makers, writers and artists seeking to reflect on Aboriginal life can learn.

The genesis of *Where the Green Ants Dream*

By the early 1970s, there had been a number of significant shifts in relation to Aboriginal identity, politics and land rights. As Attwood and Markus observe, during the 1960s:

the primary focus of Aboriginal politics began to shift away from the ideal of rights for Aborigines as Australian citizens to that of *Aboriginal* rights, the rights of Aborigines as the *Aboriginal* peoples of this continent. For the first time the long-held Aboriginal demand for land was couched in terms of 'land rights.'

(Attwood and Markus 1999: 20, original emphasis)



Figure 1: *Me lookem you*. Werner Herzog and a Yirrkala child, 1979.
Photo: Michael Edols, ACS.

Concurrently, there also began a 'major change in Aboriginal consciousness and identity,' with Aboriginal people increasingly seeing themselves as 'a common national group—"Aboriginal Australians" or "the First Australians"—with a shared historical experience of oppression' and as having 'a shared culture, which was increasingly defined and represented in terms of "tradition"'. In this process, Aborigines from settled areas renewed their sense of Aboriginality by identifying with more traditionally oriented Aborigines from remote areas (Attwood and Markus 1999: 20).

A significant landmark in these processes was the 1970–71 Northern Territory Supreme Court case of *Milirrpum v Nabalco*, which was the culmination of a long battle by a group of Aborigines from eastern Arnhem Land for the recognition of land rights. They objected to the federal government's grant of a mineral lease to the Swiss mining company, Nabalco, over part of their traditional lands. Among those making the then radical claim for communal native title were members of the Marika family, including Roy (1931–93) and his nephew Wandjuk (1927–87). This case was itself ultimately unsuccessful, however the political issue remained current. Thus the Labour Party, elected in 1972 with Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister, came to power undertaking to 'restore to Aboriginal people [...] their lost power of self-determination' (quoted by Attwood and Markus 1999: 21). In 1973 Whitlam revisited questions raised by the *Milirrpum v Nabalco* case by calling a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights in the Northern Territory, and appointing Sir Edward Woodward, who had appeared for the *Milirrpum* plaintiffs, as Commissioner. Woodward consulted widely, including with members of the Marika family, before releasing an interim report for discussion in July 1973 and then a final report in April 1974 (Woodward 2005: 97–106; 133–52).

This very topical question of Aboriginal land rights, incorporating also the question of how, if at all, such rights might be accommodated by white Australia, fascinated Werner Herzog when he first visited Australia in August 1973, a

3. Herzog later observed of this visit: 'I read about [...] [the] battle of some Aborigines against a mining company that did bauxite mining in the north-west of Australia [sic]. And I learned that many such struggles took place. It intrigued me [...]' (quoted in Elsaesser 1986: 145).

guest of the Perth International Film Festival.³ Herzog came to Australia as a New German Cinema auteur whose international reputation was being consolidated. He had recently made *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (1972), one of the films for which he is best known today, and was about to make *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974). Both films are fictions spun from true stories and explore themes and methods that would remain significant for Herzog's oeuvre. In *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, for example, the hero is a child-like founding who has been raised to adulthood almost entirely without intercourse with society. The film follows Hauser's doomed interaction with that society once he is 'abandoned' to it. This is a theme that would be explored, albeit from a different perspective, in *Where the Green Ants Dream*. The 'exotic' set location of *Aguirre* (the Amazonian rainforest) and Herzog's casting of non-actors (including local Indio people) were two practices which continued to underpin his work as a feature-film director, particularly on *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), a film shot in South America with the assistance of local extras. Notoriously, these extras were required to perform the Herculean feat of hauling a steamboat over a mountain range. It was in relation to *Fitzcarraldo* that criticisms of Herzog's use (or abuse) of Indigenous peoples—who do the hauling—also began to be voiced (Franklin 1983: 113; Lewis 1995: 258, 270).

In 1973 Herzog had already been sufficiently inspired by the question of Aboriginal land rights to write a film treatment entitled *Where the Green Ants Dream*. However, he soon became sidetracked by other film work, including *Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Heart of Glass* (1976) and *Stroszek* (1977). His plans received a fresh impetus when a collection of films about Aboriginal Australia were shown at the Berlin Film Festival in March 1978. Amongst these were Michael Edols's important documentaries *Lalai Dreamtime* (1975) and *Floating this Time* (1975). Herzog was particularly impressed by Edols's work and the two began a professional relationship. Herzog travelled to Derby in north-western Australia with Edols and met Sam Woolagoodjah, who had featured in the documentaries. Herzog and Edols then decided to collaborate on a film with Woolagoodjah. However, the prospective star died during the pre-production phase. Considering this loss irreplaceable, Herzog shelved the project, but found himself again dwelling on it in 1982, during the arduous shooting of *Fitzcarraldo* (Mizrahi 1984: 9).

In early 1983 Herzog returned to Australia, investigating the possibilities of bringing *Where the Green Ants Dream* to fruition. The producer and public intellectual Phillip Adams now became a critical player in allowing Herzog to realize his film. Herzog and Adams had met in 1977 at the Cannes Film Festival (Adams 1984), where Adams, as chairman of the Australian Film Commission, had been promoting the Australian film *Don's Party* (Beresford, 1976). Adams recalled that Herzog's pitch 'concerned land rights versus mining interests and our blasphemous indifference to Aboriginal sacred sites' and expressed that he 'was happy to help, although the plot Werner outlined sounded suspiciously like *Fitz Carraldo* [sic] II—except that the South American Indians had become Aborigines and the wretched steamship was to be replaced by a Hercules transport [aircraft]' (Adams 1984: 2). Herzog reassured Adams and the director Paul Cox (whose films Herzog admired and with whom he wished to work)



Figure 2: Werner Herzog, wrecks, and a boab tree in the delta lands, Mowanjun community dump, North-Western Australia, 1979. Photo: Michael Edols, ACS.

who, in turn, apparently assuaged the film-maker's concerns about hostility to the project from the Australian government. They did stress, however, that Herzog get the project approved by Aboriginal Australians:

Our concern was not with Canberra, but with the Aboriginal people, as the 'green ants' myth was of Werner's invention and sounded a little Walt Disneyish.

Consequently, I made the following proposition: if he would use my friend, black activist Gary Foley as a go-between with the Aboriginal communities, and if they approved the direction of the script, I would use my good offices to facilitate the production.

I also suggested that he use Wandjuk Marika.

(Adams 1984)

Gary Foley and Wandjuk Marika were Indigenous Australians with disparate backgrounds. Foley (born 1950 in Grafton, of Gumbainggir descent) is an activist who was involved in the 1971 Springbok tour demonstrations, the 1972 Tent Embassy in Canberra as well as in the establishment of both Redfern's Aboriginal Legal Service and the Melbourne Aboriginal Medical Service. As an actor he has appeared in several films, including Philip Noyce's 1977 feature *Backroads*. In fact, Herzog had already met Foley in 1978 when the latter was in Berlin for the special screening of the Aboriginal films, which also included *Backroads* (Foley 2006).

Marika was one of the most respected traditional Aboriginal leaders in the country. He was one of the ritual leaders of the Rirratjinu people, an accomplished painter and traditional musician, had translated the Bible into Gumatj and had assisted in the preparation, in 1963, of the bark

petition to the Australian government protesting against the mineral lease to Nabalco. As has been observed, he was a witness in *Milirrpum v Nabalco* and also gave evidence to the Woodward Royal Commission. From 1973, he was a member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council and became its chairman in the late 1970s. He was awarded an OBE in 1979. Marika travelled widely during the 1970s and early 1980s, representing Aboriginal culture around Australia and abroad. Like Foley he also had experience in film-making (Marika 1995). In 1971, for example, he oversaw the re-enactment of the Djang'kawu story in Ian Dunlop's documentary film, *Memory of Mawalan* (1983). Marika articulated the need to protect sacred rights in Aboriginal symbols (Adams 1984) and also had a clear understanding of the mechanics of commercializing works by Aboriginal artists: in 1976 he set up the Aboriginal Artists Agency which collected copyright fees for the reproduction of Aboriginal works of art (Marika 1995: 11; Wallis 2007).

As an activist, Foley was attracted by the possibility that the film might gain notoriety for the cause of land rights. He acted as 'Aboriginal Consultant' for *Where the Green Ants Dream* and thought *inter alia* to protect the Aboriginal participants from exploitation. His initial fear that Wandjuk Marika might be talked into signing an unfavourable contract to appear in the film proved unfounded. He soon found that Marika had negotiated terms far more attractive than Foley himself had thought possible (Foley 2006).

Marika and Herzog agreed to favourable payment for the members of his family, who were cast *en masse* to appear in the film. Jenny Isaacs observes that 'the money the family made from the film enabled them to move away from Yirrkala to Yalanbara [Port Bradshaw, the family's ancestral lands]' (Marika 1995: 138; see also 18–20). Herzog also agreed to special contractual concessions. Given the significance of Wandjuk as a tribal leader, it was necessary to allow him to be absent for up to three weeks to attend to funeral preparations, if necessary (Mizrahi 1984: 17).

The plot: its sources and themes

As Thomas Elsaesser has identified, *Where Green Ants Dream* is—for the director of *Aguirre* and *Kaspar Hauser*—a surprisingly conventional feature film (Elsaesser 1984: 289). It tells the story of the Ayers mining company's prospecting in central Australia. The company encounters trouble when it runs a test on what turns out to be a sacred Aboriginal site related to the 'green ant's dreaming.' The main plot follows the doomed attempts by a young Ayers engineer, Lance Hackett, to mediate between his employer and the Aborigines. These efforts run concurrently with preparations for a legal battle between Ayers and the Commonwealth of Australia and various Aboriginal groups. Hackett might succeed in brokering a pre-court 'goodwill' deal whereby Ayers presents the Aborigines with a Hercules aircraft (which seemingly represents an oversized 'green ant'), but his well-intentioned attempts to understand the Aborigines and their beliefs are rebuffed. So too is the radical land-rights claim: Ayers and the Commonwealth win the court case, leaving the Aborigines and Hackett to contemplate their futures. In the aftermath, one Aboriginal man, Watson

(an inebriate 'half-caste' boasting air-force experience) takes the Hercules off the ground and, together with its Aboriginal passengers, it veers into the distance and, probably, towards wreckage. Hackett is left disillusioned and destined for the life of an outsider, living in a water tank on the outskirts of a remote Aboriginal settlement.

Herzog's film occupies an uncomfortable position between feature film and documentary. Significant parts of the film were taken from historical 'documentary' sources. Indeed, the Marikas themselves had been involved in a situation that was markedly similar to the scenario of the film. This hybridity—whilst it was not untypical for many German films made since the 1960s, and reflected Herzog's biography as a maker of both feature films and what Elsaesser has called 'so-called documentaries'⁴—was a significant cause of unease among critics and the Aboriginal participants.

The writer Bob Ellis, who was 'hired to rewrite and "Australianise" the dialogue of [the] screenplay' has observed that Herzog 'knew a lot about Australia for some reason' but also that the film is 'a shocker. It takes no account of the facts' (Bredow 1984). In the event, Herzog did take some account of the facts, albeit in an idiosyncratic fashion. A major source for the screenplay, and, in particular, for the lengthy courtroom scenes, was the *Milirrpum v Nabalco* case. The director did exercise a certain amount of artistic licence (see Hurley 2006b), but this latitude is not surprising. A law report is written for quite a different purpose than a film script. The depth of legal analysis required in a judgment does not make for a thrilling cinematic experience and so substantial editing and embellishment—in the form, for example, of violent objections taken by counsel, of dramatic revelations or confessions made in the face of brow-beating cross examination, and so on—are required to create part of a film narrative from such material. In the context of a feature film with commercial aspirations, the weight Herzog placed on the courtroom scenes and his reliance on *Milirrpum v Nabalco* was a considerable risk, such that one critic (unfairly) described the film as containing 'the most boring courtroom scene in cinematic history' (Koeser 1984). In my view, the courtroom scenes have a certain authenticity, generated by Herzog's use, for example, of references to actual legal cases and arguments raised in *Milirrpum v Nabalco*. The failure of the well-meaning judge to be able to comprehend the deep meaning of the sacred *rangga* represented to the court as evidence of the Aborigines' title to the land (also a feature of *Milirrpum v Nabalco*) add additional authenticity.

In other respects, Herzog's script was far looser with the facts. He made one of the Aboriginal characters a member of the late Sam Woolagoodjah's Worora tribe from north-western Australia. The others were—like the Marikas themselves—Rirratjinu from north-eastern Arnhem Land. However, both groups were represented as being a 'mata-mala combination' (Herzog 1984: 81) and it is inferred that they are living in the same area (which the film script identifies as being near Coober Pedy in South Australia). In interview Herzog observed that the 'green ant dreaming' was, essentially, a figment of his own imagination, 'basically an invented mythology' (quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 10). However, this was only partly true. Later in the interview he confessed that the green ant is, for some tribal Aborigines, the totem animal 'that has created the world, and

4. Elsaesser notes that these 'so-called documentaries' involve a 'distrust of signification' (and hence are unlike more conventional documentaries which assume an authoritative tone) and that Herzog's films are constitutionally hybrid: 'Herzog has often stated his detestation of *cinéma vérité*, and yet his cinema is unthinkable without the documentary element against which the fiction, as it were, rebels, but to which it also always submits' (Elsaesser 1986: 150, 145).

5. In the film script, in particular, the culprit is clearly American capitalism and culture: Hackett is written as an American; the mining workers drink Coca Cola; the elderly Miss Strehlow's dog Ben Franklin (whose namesake, the personification of American enlightened capitalism, appears on US currency) has lost himself somewhere in the desert. This anti-Americanism is quite typical of Herzog's generation in Germany.

created human beings' (quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 17). Wandjuk Marika also later identified that the green ant dreaming does exist, but that it is associated with a different area and clan, near Oenpelli in the Northern Territory (Marika 1995: 140). As discussed below, this was a significant cause for Marika's discomfort with regard to the film.

As has been observed, the film is, to a significant extent, an extension of themes explored in *Kaspar Hauser*. It acts as a vehicle for Herzog's socio-critical meditations on western civilization and capitalism (represented by white Australia and the Ayers mining company), its attitudes to the ecology, and the 'monstrous loss' of traditional culture it causes.⁵ For him, the Aborigines become a metaphor for the land itself: 'They understand themselves as part of the earth. It is as if there is a universal body, and they are only part of that body' (quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 13). Although his film theoretically leaves their destiny open—there is no confirmation about what has happened to the missing Hercules – Herzog is unequivocal in interview. When asked whether the Aborigines were upon the point of becoming extinct, he averred: '[t]he tragedy is irrevocable. I can't protect them, I don't think anybody can really. We will lose, we will be poor, stripped naked at the end and we will only have McDonald culture on this earth. [...] It is a great tragedy [...] [f]or the entire world' (quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 10).

Herzog's freewheeling approach to Aboriginal tradition was influenced not only by his critique of western civilization, but also by a distrust of anthropological methods and by his legitimate belief in the difficulty of an outsider truly knowing traditional Aboriginal culture:

We did not want to be like anthropological researchers strictly following their rules. I wanted to have legends and mythology that come close to the thinking and the way of life of the aborigines [*sic*], but I made it clear to them that the film is not their dreaming, it is *my* dreaming. [...]

I can't bear it that there are so many people of all kinds, anthropologists, political activists and politicians, who claim they know exactly what has to be done with them, who claim to understand them completely. My understanding of them is limited, therefore I want to develop my own mythology.

(quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 10)

Whilst this approach is based on a valid philosophical insight about the difficulty in knowing the 'other' (see also Readings 1992; Kaplan 1997: 154ff), Herzog's subsequent step of appropriation seems exploitative. The appropriation of 'other' cultural material was not necessarily an atypical German practice in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, however. As I have argued elsewhere, there were cultural reasons motivating the German appropriation of 'other' cultures based on a desire to distance oneself from German-ness and the tainted past, just as the absence of large and vocal postcolonial communities living in Germany meant that there were fewer brakes on appropriative practices (Hurley 2006a; see also Sieg 2002). It would also be wrong to conclude that Herzog's practices involved riding completely roughshod over the interests of the Aboriginal people involved with the film, despite the fact that the Marikas ultimately felt alienated by the experience (see below). According to Herzog, he both explained his

concept to them and also participated in negotiations about what could and could not be represented. Whilst they were apparently satisfied with the overall concept of the film, they requested both that certain names be changed and that sacred *rangga*—that is, the secret objects which demonstrate the Aboriginal relationship with the land—not be depicted. Changes were made to the script, although not to the credits (Mizrahi 1984: 14). The Marikas were referred to there by name, as is customary in film credits.⁶ In general Herzog took the view that 'the group of aborigines [sic] with whom I have worked have understood that it does not depict precisely their philosophical concept of dreamtime' (quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 13–14). That he understood them to have 'agreed' to his proposal is implicit from the interview. Bostock points out, however, that Aboriginal cultural notions of 'agreement' can diverge radically from the western concept (Bostock 1990: 23).

Aboriginal reception

Notwithstanding Herzog's beliefs, his 'imaginative' approach did upset Wandjuk Marika. Marika not only felt disturbed by the destruction by mining of the landscape around the Coober Pedy film location but also—in accordance with traditional Aboriginal beliefs—had clear views about who was able to tell what.⁷ He subsequently observed: 'This sacred object belong to the Green Ant Dreaming, special and foundation to the Aboriginal people, different part of Australia—just imagine it! Just pretending that story, just the made-up story, for green ants.' He was also uncomfortable with the film's proximity to documentary (or even parody) and with the notion of playing himself. Marika later stated: '[T]he three of us flew over to Melbourne pretending to the Land Right case, which is Judge Blackburn's work, which is made up—that was the very dangerous thing to do' (Marika 1995: 140). As de Heer learned in the process of making *The Balander and the Ten Canoes*, from the Aboriginal perspective, any Aboriginal story worth telling is, by definition, a true story. Meddling with the 'green ants dreaming' or with the important story of *Milirrpum v Nabalco* must therefore have seemed sacrilegious to the Marikas. The naming of the Marikas in the film credits was also a contentious matter. As Jenny Isaacs glosses, 'Wandjuk experienced considerable shame and anger when he noticed later that the *Rirratjinu* names appeared in the credits. He feared this undermined their land rights statements and efforts as the film could be seen as a parody of the first Land Rights case fought by the *Rirratjinu* in 1971' (Marika 1995: 138).

Marika was also upset by Herzog's idiosyncratic approach to directing (Marika 1995: 140), which involved putting his talent under pressure, in order that they may display more fully 'their essence' (Elsaesser 1986: 153; Ellis, quoted in Bredow 1984). This in fact jeopardized the film. Wandjuk later recalled Roy's reaction to a particular moment during filming:

When we were in that film, sometime Roy would get angry because the bulldozer come toward us and we were protecting the land, everybody was sitting on the ground covered with the blanket and the bulldozer pushed the dirt towards us and covering right to our navels! And then Roy talk and

6. Had Herzog been making the film later, he may have had the benefit of Lester Bostock's protocol, which stresses the Aboriginal right of anonymity (Bostock 1990: 30).

7. On the divergence of traditional Aboriginal attitudes to authorship and storytelling from western notions about individual artistic creation, see Langton (1993: 66ff).

8. I adopt the term from Marcia Langton who outlines the diversity and pluralism of contemporary Aboriginal culture (Langton 1993: 11ff).

really swearing at them and turn round and talk to the Werner Herzog and he said,

'Don't ever do this again to us.
We don't know what you talking about.
What you tried to make this film about,
You should have been get the right people.
We're from a different area, we're from a different country.
Don't ever do this one again, otherwise if you're going to do this,
we just going to pack up our things and go home.'

(Marika 1995: 140)

Marika's own memory of the film-making process was also negative:

They always ask me to say this and say that and do what I don't want to do,
and I said,

'Look, don't ever ask me to do that
look here, don't ever tell me,
I don't know how to speak the English, I know what to deal with,
I know how to mix.'

And Werner Herzog said, 'Yes, I know but I'm from different country.'

'What does it matter what different country, why you come to Australia?'

(Marika 1995: 141)

This telling episode highlights a moment of failure of intercultural communication, of the Lyotardian *différend* identified by Readings in his interpretation of the film (Readings 1992). Herzog does not appear to have discerned (or to have wanted to discern) the significance of the fact that his approach was at odds with Aboriginal rules about storytelling. Perhaps he was simply too absorbed by the objective of finishing a film which had eluded him for so long; of escaping another drawn-out *Fitzcarraldo*-like experience.

If the script and Herzog's practices upset some of the more traditional Aboriginal participants, then his depiction of a timeless and non-teleological (yet probably doomed) Aboriginal Australia may also have been at odds with the self-representation of other contemporary Aboriginal people. Some (white) critics have voiced the opinion, for example, that Herzog's Aboriginal characters were not adequately individuated (see, for example, Hoberman quoted in Lewis 1995: 261). However, a close reading indicates that Herzog does not represent his traditional Aboriginal characters simply as noble savages. As Elsaesser points out: '[f]rom the outset, they show the kind of mental agility that becomes a definite form of wit: they may be doomed as a tribe, but they survive every concrete situation, like true heroes in the comic-picaresque tradition. [...] [T]hey adjust to their opponents while not ceding their position' (Elsaesser 1984: 290). More so than the edited film, Herzog's unabridged film script also attempts to provide some depth and complexity. Not all of it is romantically appealing. In addition to the 'half-caste' alcoholic Watson (who is ultimately, and problematically, responsible for the putative and symbolic demise of the plane), Herzog depicts 'settled' urban Aborigines,⁸ including those who sit on the visitors' benches during the court case and who vigorously protest the unfavourable outcome of the case. Aboriginal people are also granted agency in that it is they who initiate the court case. The spectrum of contemporary Aboriginal