

culture was also reinforced by Herzog in an interview, where he recognizes that Aboriginal Australians lead nuanced and self-directed lives (despite their apparently imminent demise):

there are groups, [...] who have adopted certain ways and certain elements from Western civilization for their survival. For example, they went to court and sued mining companies, and are getting revenues now. That survival is maintained through such technical means as wireless radio, which they use to call for help and support amongst other groups, and to activate political groups within the cities. In some areas it functions very well; medical and legal aid is organized with and for them, there are some astonishing things going on.

(quoted in Mizrahi 1984: 13)

On balance though, Herzog's film can be validly criticized for not sufficiently 'explor[ing] the [productive] intersection of traditional and modern cultures' and, following Eric Michaels's formulation, for engaging in 'that dangerous fantasy of authenticity' (Lewis 1995: 262, 265, 270).

The representation of Aboriginal Australia remains a vexed question for the film. Part of the problem is that even whilst Herzog—in his interview and through the character of Hackett—validly thematizes the difficulty of outsiders knowing traditional Aboriginal culture, 'the film makes it seem that these stories belong to Australian Aborigines rather than to Werner Herzog's imagination' (Morris 1984; see also Strick 1984).

Critical reception

Australian critics and pundits were quick to attack the film, which was shown first at Cannes in May 1984, then gained worldwide release in August. The criticisms related, in part, to aesthetics (see Adams 1984;



Figure 3: Werner Herzog and two Yirrkala children, 1979. Photo: Michael Edols ACS.

Brooks and Finane 1984; Koeser 1984; Morris 1984) as well as to the invented nature of the 'green ants dreaming' (Adams 1984; Ellis, quoted in Bredow 1984; Anon. 1984). Various critics were confounded by the signification of the dreaming, and by the film more broadly (Koeser 1984; Williams 1984; Anon. 1985). Dorre Koeser asked, for example: 'What is it? Why is it? [...] Whatever it is, it leaves "too many silly questions" unanswered and too many viewers uninterested in even formulating the questions' (Koeser 1984). However, this criticism does not take into account the difficulties of signification and the resistance of the signified to the cinematic signifier, which Herzog had thematized in his film script (if not entirely adhered to in practice). He had, after all, depicted the difficulties that Hackett encountered in trying to get to know the Aborigines and understand their perspective. He had also depicted failure of communication (when, for example, Wandjuk Marika's character answered one of Hackett's well-meaning questions with the statement 'Too many silly questions!'). However, Herzog himself had also made liberal use of Aboriginal mythology in writing the film script. Notwithstanding Hackett's difficulties then, the viewer might still have inferred from the film that Herzog held a deep understanding of the Aboriginal people.

Given the land rights subject matter, it was unavoidable that the film would be the subject of politicized criticism. Leading the charge was Phillip Adams, who was so incensed by the film at Cannes that he distributed a press release to international journalists declaring: 'the film infers that the Australian Government both opposes land rights and ridicules Aboriginal culture, in particular dismissing the significance of their sacred sites.' He pointed out that the Australian government had made a number of advances in the field of Aboriginal land rights and that it had also appeared in court on the side of the Aborigines. Upon his return to Australia, Adams also attacked the film in an article titled 'Dammit Herzog, you are a liar!' in *The Australian* (Adams 1984).

By the time he finally made it, Herzog's film was somewhat out of date. The Woodward Royal Commission had delivered its final report into Northern Territory land rights in 1974. Woodward's recommendations (which dealt with the ways in which Northern Territory land rights could be recognized) were largely put into effect in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. However, whilst this legislation covered the Territory, it did not apply to Aboriginal country outside it: the greater part of the continent. Within the Territory, it also neglected to make provision for those Aborigines whose traditional attachment to the land had been interrupted by their having moved into settlements such as Alice Springs (Woodward 2005: 133-52). So, if the government had made advances—which Herzog neglected to reflect in his film and which Adams was bound to criticize—the matter of land rights was far from resolved in 1984. As one contemporary critic observed: 'the issue of land rights and mining leases remains a lively one' (Sullivan 1984). Indeed, the landmark Mabo case, which finally elicited the High Court of Australia's recognition of native title in 1992, had already been instituted in 1982, and did involve, at least initially, proceedings against the Commonwealth of Australia. This was a matter to which Adams did not refer in his article.

Among the critics, Mardy Amos appears to have been alone in praising the educative value of the film:

perhaps in drawing attention to the situation of the Aboriginal land rights situation before action was taken by the Government, it does serve a purpose.

Many white Australians are aware of and sympathise with the Aboriginal battle for land rights, but there are equal numbers who feel the Government has gone overboard in granting as much as they have.

(Amos 1987)

Most Australian critics did attack the film, however. Sandra Hall in the *Bulletin* objected both to Herzog's 'high-mindedness' and his 'simple-mindedness' (Hall 1984). Meaghan Morris in the *Australian Financial Review* characterized the film as a 'plodding sermon on the sins of European civilization' and cited its 'banal breast-beating so familiar to European romanticism.' Like Adams, she complained of Herzog's limited 'awareness of the complexity of land rights arguments, of debates over the status of Aboriginal law, or indeed of the broader history of a people whom he declares in an interview to be on the verge of extinction' (Morris 1984). *The Australian's* Evan Williams similarly considered the film 'grievously simplistic and self-indulgent' given that 'the resolution of these conflicts is a problem of exquisite complexity for modern governments' (Williams 1984).

Conclusion

Herzog's film is problematic at a number of levels. As a feature, it is unashamedly didactic and, as one American reviewer put it, 'heavy-handed' (Thomas 1985). *Where the Green Ants Dream* might have worked better in German, where it can be located in the tradition of (neo-)romanticism, than it does in English. Had the film been conceived as a reflective documentary, these elements might also have worked as a personal voice-over by Herzog. But if the feature narrative is 'heavy-handed,' then its hybridized documentary aspect also falls short: those parts which are more closely related to reality—such as the courtroom scene—only go to highlight the failure of the other (non-'documentary') parts to 'ring true.'

Herzog did make liberal use of Aboriginal culture to come up with a 'personal mythology,' which can be criticized for not adequately reflecting the complexity of contemporary Aboriginal existence(s). The Marikas ultimately felt uncomfortable with the project, given their unwillingness to act out a narrative that was close to but at odds with their own experiences, and over which they did not have traditional storytelling rights. However, it is questionable that they or the activist Gary Foley would wish to be characterized as victims in relation to the film: the Marikas negotiated favourable contractual terms and a payment that enabled them to move back onto their ancestral lands; Foley regarded the film as an opportunity to gain visibility for the land rights cause.⁹ Based on the reactions of the Marikas, Phillip Adams and Bob Ellis, any intercultural dialogue between the parties remained strictly limited. Although this was potentially thematized in the film in Hackett's failed attempts to understand traditional (and essentially secret) Aboriginal culture, the quasi-documentary

9. Paradoxically, the conceptualization of *Where the Green Ants Dream* as a feature film also had repercussions in this respect: had the film been a documentary, its distribution and potential reach would have been far more circumscribed. Those wishing to pull the history of Aboriginal-settler relations and politics into cinematic focus are more likely to get their message across to a broader audience if they produce a feature film.

10. These issues were given excellent coverage in the documentary film *Burden of Dreams* (Blank, 1984) and also in an accompanying book, which reproduces the film script for *Burden of Dreams* and includes the documentary film-makers' journal materials and a number of essays and articles (Blank and Bogan 1984).
11. Elsaesser puts it succinctly: 'Sometimes it seems that Herzog, for the sake of his films, makes himself into the instrument of this society [of which he is critical], in order to simulate the conditions he set out to document' (Elsaesser 1986: 152).

feel of the film concealed that it was, in part, Herzog's own 'baroque fantasy' (Strick 1984).

However, even whilst *Where the Green Ants Dream* can be (and was) criticized, it continues to have value. As protocols continue to set down the principles to be applied in relation to films about Aboriginal Australia, this film can be used as a reference point for some of the practical difficulties inherent in intercultural collaboration. As de Heer's experience also shows, this process can be exquisitely complicated. Following advice from Adams and Foley, Herzog tried to approach *Where the Green Ants Dream* in a respectful manner, albeit on his own terms and within the context of his overarching artistic vision and desire (and, presumably, financial obligation) to complete the film. His film squarely raises the uncomfortable possibility that, in some cases, the objectives of the various parties might be irreconcilable.

It is an irony that—like *Fitzcarraldo*—this is another case of the story behind Herzog's film being more interesting and illuminating than the film itself. However, it is unfortunate that—unlike *Fitzcarraldo* or *Ten Canoes*—there was no documentary created to reflect on the intricate issues cast up by the film and its making.¹⁰ This article has sought to remedy that, but it would not have been possible unless *Where the Green Ants Dream* had been made in the first place. That observation delivers the final dilemma which recurs in relation to some of Herzog's films,¹¹ but which also speaks to the older argument about the interface of ethics and aesthetics. How are we to judge a film that can be both criticized and learned from and, without which, those highly productive processes would not have been possible?

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Production details

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