

RACISM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINES IN FILM

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I.

In employing the word 'representation' in the title of this paper, we are speaking from a now well-established position in media studies where objects of analysis (say films) are *not* opposed to some sort of 'reality' which they supposedly 'reflect' more or less adequately.¹ They are rather seen as *signifying* objects which are articulated within a field of other signifying objects such as institutions, languages, critical discourses and material artifacts.

Thus the problem for this paper is to trace the historical emergence of certain signifying practices for film-making in Australia, concentrating on the social apparatuses which produce them. The problem is not one of trying to decide if a way of representing Aborigines in film is adequate to the 'realities' of the way you/they live. There is no discourse which constructs the 'truth' of Aboriginal lifestyles, though there is one which would implicitly make this claim, anthropology. Again, this discipline represents the people studied in a partial and ideological way, and these representations or signifying practices can be articulated with other practices, such as film-making, to assure fairly powerful reproduction of current and conservative knowledge on Aboriginal societies via ethnographic film, one genre which we shall not be investigating in this paper.

What we would like to examine is the way in which representations emerge from the use of filmic codes and techniques as they are articulated with social institutions and policies. For instance, what sorts of film-making techniques were deployed in the context of the government policy of 'assimilation'? What sorts of techniques are presently being used in the context of 'multiculturalism'?³ We would like to examine a number of films in this way to get a general picture of the discursive formations which characterize the making of films in Australia containing images of Aborigines. The first of these is the paternalistic *assimilationist* formation; a number of films were made during the fifties and sixties which were part of this formation. This was followed by a liberal *multiculturalist* formation, and this is with us at the present day. The third formation relates to a linking of Aboriginal groups and individuals with leftist *independent* film-making groups. The films resulting are significantly seen as

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being produced within an ideology of 'self-determination' (the government's phrase) or 'community control' (the Aborigines' phrase).

However, before proceeding with this particular analysis, it is important to have a theoretical perspective on the word 'racism'. In the context of a euphoric revival of Australian film-making, in which some of the most concerted efforts at being 'progressive' have been in the area of representations of Aborigines and Aboriginal politics, one must guard against totting up images as 'positive' or 'negative' (in

relation to what?) and rather shift the mode of intervention to one of understanding the *process* by which Aboriginal subjects are constructed and the conditions of plausibility for such constructions (Bhabha 1983: 18).

An understanding of racism, therefore, depends on an understanding of shifting relations of *domination*: the sorts of positions set up for Aboriginal subjects represented and positions set up for the viewer to consume the images. (For example, in *Gallipoli* the lads leave the station to go off to the city. The Aboriginal station-hand runs excitedly after the buggy as we watch from the homestead). Racism also depends on unifying the people and making generalizations.

Uninformed discourse, which is removed from those places where Aborigines are fighting for survival, will have it that 'the problem with the Aboriginal is this ...' or 'the Aboriginal situation is ...' or even 'the problem with your Aboriginal is that...'. The repetition of these *singulars* not only ignores the multiple contours of Aboriginal experience in this country: different languages, different lifestyles, different issues, seeking to locate the 'problem' at a human level which effectively obscures the political nature of issues, but also it sees 'the problem' as being the responsibility of Aboriginal people; it's *their* problem, not *our* problem' some will glibly announce, the pronouns revealing how the debate has been confined to white circles.

The way that discourses exclude the considerations of the people suffering the racial problem has been outlined by Stuart Hall:

Over a long period of time (the media) consensualize certain frameworks as the natural, normal adequate way of explaining why people feel that way about, for example, the unions, Zimbabwe, or the question of race. That very activity rules out a certain number of other ways of understanding the problems which do not get dealt with in the media. (1980:6).

And:

One of the frameworks that we look at here is race as a social problem, and there are very well-established ways in television of setting up a social problem and of handling it, and it matters a hell of a lot whose social problem you think it is. (1980: 7)

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From this lead we can conceptualize the problem for this paper. Accepting that Australians live in a racist society (and without entering into any red-herring debates about whether it is more or less racist than, say, South Africa), the problem is to reveal that certain cinematic forms and practices reproduce this racism in an uncritical way. The problem is also one of accepting that there is this ubiquitous racist framework that may entrap even directors and producers who consider themselves radical or 'liberated'. As Stuart Hall (1980) says: 'You get trapped by the framework and so you have radical and reactionary positions but both *within* the reactionary framework'. For instance, this would occur if one took up the debate about the relative racism of Australia and South Africa, or if one saw the significant issue of racial conflict in Britain as being the one about numbers; how many black immigrants can the country take in?

In fact, rather than accepting that dominant discourses tend to reproduce problems of racism, media representations of Aborigines often continue to represent Aborigines as genetically responsible for their/your own situations; the race carries with it the seeds of its own destruction as Aborigines regularly, in the white discourses, find themselves incapable of 'taking up the challenge', 'holding their grog', and

so on. This aspect of racism could be called the geneticist fallacy. It is the one which allows sports commentators, in backhanded compliments, to refer to the 'natural'¹ ability of black players. This conflation of the natural and the cultural is a typical strategy informing the representations of Aborigines in Australian movies. Similarly, in traditional Australian literature, Aborigines have taken up positions in which they are at one with the arcane and mysterious landscape, positions which can conveniently be opposed to the fictions of highly acculturated city life of the whites.

This, then, is one well-attested racist strategy; the reading of Aboriginal culture as 'nature' and as a foil or background to European forms of culture in Australia. Other racist displacements of meaning will represent Aborigines as non-adult, non-human, even inanimate (Muecke, 1982); there are very few which can represent Aboriginal societies as engaging adequately with contemporary problems and on an equal footing with white society. There is little promotional gain in representing a given group as different but equivalent in efficacy, so with each representation there is a corresponding socially-related investment in the production of Aboriginal culture as a commodity.

But is this a problem? Isn't the commodification of cultures 'standard practice' in certain media? It could be said that the same occurs with representations of 'Australian culture' as it is packaged, say, for the tourist industry. But what is at issue is the nature of the appropriations, and the sector of the population which directly or indirectly benefits from the cultural-representational packages.

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For instance, in the case of anthropological representations, which have traditionally sought to reconstruct traditional life (and have thus worked in parallel with certain romantic 'noble savage' representations), there is an investment which is of the order of knowledge. Many Aborigines feel that this knowledge, which has been produced at sites where blacks and whites encounter each other, is of total benefit to the whites, and is disseminated in forms (academic discourses) which make it inaccessible to black people.

Similarly, Tasmanian Aborigines feel that representations of the demise of their people (*The Last Tasmanian*, *Manganinnie*) write them out of existence just as they are struggling to gain political effectivity. Representations of Tasmanian Aborigines are thus constructed and appropriated by those who for different reasons wish to reconstruct the past (archeology, historical dramatization), while a white audience position is set up which is comforting for those who wish to be assured that the trouble is over. *Manganinnie* thus functions as a cathartic experience identical to that described by Kathe Boehringer for *Women of the Sun*: 'Feeling bad about the past is, in some ways, a barrier to understanding it; resolving to 'be better' in the future may make us feel more noble momentarily' (1982: 19).

These examples point, therefore, to just two of the ways in which representations of Aborigines are displaced towards dominant discursive formations (the universities, history as drama) and away from the immediate concerns of the minority groups. The problems, in these instances, quite clearly become problems for academics writing papers and teaching materials, or for professional film-makers engaged in the making of films. The problems for Aborigines, which may have been visible or articulated at the site of the encounter, do not emerge in the final product. The annoyance that many Aboriginal people feel in regard to these appropriations comes out in phrases like: 'This film speaks as if we don't exist', or 'We don't want to be represented as objects of knowledge'. Or again, from the point of view of Aboriginal people, the 'problem' may simply be absent; the camera may have failed to represent the people as an oppressed group. And if sub-standard living conditions are shown, the soundtrack may simply fail to give a satisfactory account of this.

II.

Prior to the 1970s, blacks have played a very minor part in Australian cinema. In the first period of Australian cinema before the First World War, some movies were made in which blacks were represented by whites made up with black faces. Blacks were cast as savages, as ferocious nuisances to the colonial endeavour. Their roles, sometimes even their appearances, were indistinguishable from those of blacks in Tarzan-type movies.

Later, films such as *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1953), and right through to *Walkabout* (Roeg, 1971) present blacks as solitary silent figures who move through magnificent landscapes, sometimes pausing on a hill top to provide the motif which completes the picture of the primordial Australian scene. This colonialist perspective was never reversed such that the pushing forward of the British Empire across Australia could be seen from the point of view of the people being displaced. A number of third-world film-makers have started to rewrite their histories through films which use the same strategies as the European and Hollywood studios, but exploit them to their own ends: from whose *point of view* is the shot taken? Who is privileged with *close-ups*? Who is allowed to *speak*? And in what *language*? One early example of such a film is *Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966) which recruits the viewer to the Algerian cause by exposing the logic of French colonial war strategy (Stam and Spence, 1983).

In the fifties and sixties a number of short films were made for which the structure and effectivity have been traced in Moore (1982). These films produced by the Commonwealth Film Unit for the Department of the Interior and the AIAS, some States' governmental film production units and some private film companies, were made in the context of roughly defined and sporadically implemented governmental policies of 'assimilation' and 'integration'. As well as being didactic for the Aboriginal viewer by showing what sorts of values and white middle-class ways of living were appropriate, they were also concrete demonstrations of government policy in action.

Areyonga (Villeminot, 1958) does both these things. It depicts the work of educators and health workers at Areyonga, a 'first stage' settlement for members of the Pitjantjatjara people, a hundred miles south-west of Alice Springs. The introductory caption itself, 'Australia presents Areyonga' articulates the promise of a solution to 'our problem'. Areyonga is presented as a *showpiece* of assimilation policies in action. It also functions as a nexus for a number of discourses of Aboriginal lifestyles. The problems facing Aborigines are specified as health, housing and education (vocational, cultural and moral). The main factors impeding successful assimilation are the Aborigines themselves; their lack of hygiene, nomadic existence, regressive culture, general apathetic, lax behaviour, etc. These problems culminate in the notion that 'Aboriginality' is a problem.

Other films from the same period reveal similar racist and disciplinary strategies of correcting the negative features of the other culture by eliminating them, then replacing them with a white middle-class constellation of values. Other titles reveal this: *A House in Town* (Department of Native Welfare, WA, 1969), *Walking in the Sunlight*, *Walking in the Shadow* (Commonwealth Film Unit, 1970), *Why Clean?* (Crofton Films, (date unknown), *Good Food, Good Health* (Department of Native Welfare, WA, 1969).

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After the 1967 (citizenship) referendum, governmental policy shifted from 'assimilation' to 'integration'. In this context, a strategy of 'cultural brokerage' appeared as Aborigines took control of their own affairs to a certain extent. The agents performing this brokerage were constructed as 'exemplary individuals'. Two films made about Charles Perkins in the late sixties marshal a discourse of individualism (he strives 'relentlessly onward') while at the same time denigrating his own people (he is marked 'out from the herd').⁴

In *Man in the Middle*, racism is evident in terms of lowered expectations for the Aboriginal subject. In order to construct Charles Perkins as an exemplary family man, we are taken inside his house where he is greeted by his wife ('a white Australian girl'). He sits down and plays with his daughter, and we notice the indications of an orderly, well-off life. The room is neat and clean, with good furniture, a piano in one corner, and we notice Perkin's wedding ring on his finger in the foreground. All this is

normal, mundane even. However, the voice-over narration forces us to marvel at this image of successful normality: 'Charlie Perkins, a half-blood Aboriginal, is one of the most extraordinary men yet produced by his environment ... To his kinsmen, the course of his life is as miraculous as a tribal myth'.

In other areas there is a similar investment in the individual who has the ability to transcend both cultures: for instance, book titles such as *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker*, and *Somewhere Between Black and White*. The biography format of the films about Perkins fails to recognise the political issues and problems for Aboriginal people. It only shows that Aboriginal individuals can occupy positions within existing frameworks of welfare and politics, and that nothing really needs to change once an Aborigine occupies the position behind the desk.

III.

In 1972 Aboriginal sovereignty began to be established with the Aboriginal Embassy in Canberra. A year later the National Aboriginal Conference was established as a representative body serving to convey the wishes of the Aboriginal and Islander people to the Federal government. The firm establishment of an Aboriginal political lobby did much to break down paternalism as a government strategy; 'assimilation' and 'integration' gave way to the liberal pluralist attitudes of 'multiculturalism', an ideology which has had varied effects as it is activated in relation to Aboriginal political issues, or in relation to representations of Aboriginal culture.

In relation to political issues multiculturalism has been aligned with notions of 'autonomy' and 'self-determination'. This rhetoric has been used by the Fraser Government to justify cutbacks in funding; for Aboriginal-controlled organizations, and non-intervention in

state race-relations (such as Noonkanbah, 1980) thereby adversely serving landrights causes. Generally, Aboriginal culture is put on a par with other national cultures in Australia. Aboriginal culture, in the context of multiculturalism, is seen as contributing to the 'richness' of cultural diversity within the country.

However, this cultural pluralism can in fact be seen as severely limiting, as multiculturalism can only recognize certain forms of Aboriginal culture as being 'Valid', as having promotional possibilities, as contributing to Australia's multicultural image overseas. A limited number of (traditional) artifacts are organized for mass production and export. Certain dance forms and music forms (notably didgeridoo), are organized for promotion by government-funded agencies.

A number of feature films started to be produced in this time of 'liberalizing the frontier', to borrow a phrase from Tim Rowse (1983). *Storm Boy* (Safran, 1976), *Manganinnie* (Heney, 1980), *The Last Wave* (Weir, 1977), and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Schepisi, 1978), produce a set of conceptions which, rather than delineating the specific characteristics of a given group in a specific situation, construct Aborigines and their lifestyles as unitary in relation to some essential (and unknowable) principle such as the 'spirituality of the dreaming' or 'closeness to nature' which ultimately engenders all action.



Another aspect of historical dramas like *Manganinnie* or fantasy dramas like *The Last Wave* is the use of the convention of *stars*. With the first film, the production team was careful to select a beautiful woman; a well-established Hollywood convention demands that the leading lady's appearance correspond to certain aesthetic criteria which may or may not correspond to Aboriginal aesthetic criteria. Similarly, in *The Last Wave*, the recruitment of David Gulpilil assures a certain recognition on the part of the audience; a recognition that the talented Aborigine can 'make it' (like Charlie Perkins); the establishment of a continuity of Aboriginal representation across a number of films; and a consequent *reduction* of this representation to the one *figure* (in the rhetorical sense of the work) in David Gulpilil. If notions of collectivity are evoked in Aboriginal representations of their societies, then perhaps the elevation of individuals to perform in 'star' roles replaces to some extent the preferred notion of collectivity.⁵ Furthermore, the massive deployment of Hollywood filmmaking conventions in the contemporary Australian cinema, gives the lie to the discourse of multiculturalism. All we find is black

faces replacing white faces in the construction of films which belong, because of their common structure, to the dominant model of the Hollywood-style movie.

One television series, *Women of the Sun*, is the multiculturalist filmic object *par excellence*. Produced for Channel 0/28 in 1982 by Generation Films, it took the form of a four-part television series, where each part, in historical order from 1824 to the present, told the story of an Aboriginal woman's struggle with some aspect of white settler society. It embodies some of the representational clichés I have described above: the narrowing of the historical analysis to that of the exemplary (and good-looking) female individual, and the romantic representation of Aborigines as proud and defiant in the face of relentless oppression from white society.

The first of these episodes (*Alinta: the flame*) supposedly reconstructs traditional Aboriginal life, but because the narrative is organized around the one figure of *Alinta* the dominant ideological representation goes against the grain of what is known about Aboriginal societies. Individuals are not singled out in traditional Aboriginal representations; in camp people certainly don't call out individuals' names as they do in the episode in question. Kin names and section names are the preferred forms.

The last episode (*Lo-arna*) is largely indistinguishable from the cop-show genre. It depicts a young girl and her mother, who had been separated, finding each other again. Rather, they almost find each other: the dramatic tension is built around their almost meeting. The final shot (a freeze-frame, like the final shots of all the episodes, capturing a moment of anguish for the heroine) has the mother framed by the *rear-view* mirror as the daughter drives away

unable to meet her again, or go 'back' to her mother's culture as the visual metaphor seems to suggest.

When these episodes were rerun on ABC television in 1983, a significant text was added. At the beginning of each episode Pat O'Shane, an Aboriginal lawyer, provided instructions for reading the texts to follow; they were to be read as serious representations of the socio-political situation of Aboriginal people in Australia. This caveat functions to unify the significance of each episode. Rather than discrete dramas, one is encouraged to read them as a unified and continuous Aboriginal history of suppressed sovereignty.

While useful in some respects, these techniques also perpetuate old problems. The usefulness of the series for the broad spectrum of Aboriginal politics is that it can be used as an argument, or rather more crudely, as a weapon, in contexts of *present* manifestations of white bigotry; certain current disciplinary and corrective institutions and practices are indicated; the mission, the reserve, and welfare's role in the adoption of Aboriginal children by white parents.

The series might also be strategically useful in Aboriginal politics in that it excites a representation of a long-repressed Aboriginal militancy, which forms a continuum with Aboriginal culture, identity and sets of demands. Little theoretical justification can be found for this representation of the lost cause revived, but it could be useful in the construction of pan-Aboriginal political intervention (in the name of collective notions of sovereignty, as in land-rights) in the face of actual differences among tribes and communities, and in the face of the ways in which dominant strategies of negotiation for political effectivity tend to splinter individuals from these communities.

In rewriting the 'lost' or suppressed history of Aborigines in the colonial encounter, the series can be seen to be investing in history-writing strategies also employed by feminists in relation to 'herstory', radical labour historians, and others. Indeed, the series intersects with feminist reflections on women because each episode is organized around a narrative about an individual woman. This sort of rewriting strategy does not, however, explicitly appear — the series could still be read as if it were 'outside' of politics; the viewer, if he or she wishes, can still reduce the 'message' to one of the need for 'basic human rights'. As Keith Tribe (1977: 13) says:

The use of history in the writings of leftist historians is quite distinct from the 'writing of history' in the films of leftist filmmakers. In the case of the former, the use of history is directly related to the problems and tasks of a specific political movement; for the latter, the association with specific political work is always more indirect, and cannot be read off from the film itself. The politics of a film are not simply inscribed in its images and narrative but in the form of its circulation.

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What was interesting about *Women of the Sun*, and its investment in multiculturalism, was the way in which this investment was taken up as a promotional strategy, and the series was widely publicized as a valuable text for distribution to community groups, unions, schools



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and tertiary courses. As a newspaper reviewer put it, 'I cannot imagine any secondary school course in Australian social history now being complete without a set of video cassettes of this series'. (O'Brian, 1982: 3). This sort of marketing is dangerous for an education system which largely lacks media studies courses. Similar things have occurred in relation to the feature film *Gallipoli*, for which the promotional material would suggest that school children take it as being, quite simply, an historical account of that particular episode of Australia's involvement in the First World War.

Multiculturalism constructs Aborigines as 'cultural' in such a way that representational packages can be marketed and distributed across a broader spectrum of society than in the past. We have seen how representations of Aborigines have shifted from notions of 'Aboriginal race' to 'Aboriginal culture' via intermediate notions of 'community' and 'individual' and how these broad categories have been articulated with social practices and film-making techniques. But within multiculturalism a certain 'positivisation' of Aboriginal culture occurs. This positive process of recognition allows for the acceptance of Aboriginal art, dance, language, etc. whilst simultaneously screening out aspects like extended family forms, aspects of Aboriginal law, 'undesirable social habits', 'unhealthy' environments and economic independence, within a rigid social harmony. In this sense the notion of 'common humanity' should be seen as a ruse. Multiculturalism, an admirable doctrine on paper, in effect allows for specific frameworks of recognition and acceptance. It, in effect, makes for new constructions of Aboriginal culture which should not be uncritically accepted as the result of progress or humanitarian leanings.

IV.

Two fairly strong strategies emerge in opposition to the hegemony of current film-making practices in relation to representations of Aborigines. One would involve a politics of abstention — handing over money and equipment to Aborigines so that they/you can control the sounds and images 'independently'. The second would involve Brechtian distancing — the working through of problems of representation whilst in the process of the construction of alternative images. Here Stuart Hall neatly combines both ideas:

I think it is quite important to get people into producing their own images, because it does not matter how professional they are; it is not a question of trying to teach kids to be television producers, but it is just that they then can contrast the images that they produce of themselves against the dominant images which they are offered, and so they know that social communication is a matter of a conflict between alternative readings of society. (1980:8).

Aboriginal film-makers, or Aboriginal-controlled film-makers, may be able to produce films which break with dominant cinematic practices, but they would only be able to do this by self-consciously undoing current techniques and trainings and making visible this deconstruction. It cannot be assumed that a just and 'true' Aboriginal expression can be unleashed through a supposedly neutral medium. If, as we have assumed, the film-making medium regularly activates racist representations, then the first job might be to expose *their* operation if one wishes to work in the area. The politics of 'speaking out', 'offreeing' or liberating a true, unmediated Aboriginal discourse is to assume 'Aboriginal experience' and

'culture' as given, as appropriate for all political situations. Particular representations must be fought for and carefully constructed in relation to political issues and contexts.

One film which does tend to move away from dominant representations of Aborigines and from conventional film-making practices is *Two Laws* produced by the Borrooloola Aboriginal community in conjunction with film-makers from Sydney Filmmakers Coop in 1982. It abandons recognitions of individuals as 'characters' which would be subject to psychological development; yet individuals do act out parts in relation to a story while commenting on their acting out. This Brechtian effect is described by Ian Hunter as one which operates if

the actor has the speech and the space in which to criticize his own work, then his work does not result in a character— (a representation of a 'personality' or 'human nature') — but quotes character in the context of its analysis. (1978:49).

Similarly, a wide-angle lens, with its concomitant 'distortion' is used in *Two Laws* to deliberately unmask the so-called naturalness of lenses with standard focal length. As the film-makers said:

The use of a wide-angle indicates how film language works. There are no cutaways, reverse shots or close-ups. The interaction between people is in one frame so that the contradictions that arise out of storytelling and the telling of history are in one frame. (Cavadini, et al, 1981:69-70).

The film develops 'open' accounts, set in a rough chronology, of first contact with settler society. The first episode of about 30 minutes is called 'Police Times'; this is followed by episodes of similar length called 'Welfare Times', 'Struggle for our Land' and 'Living with Two Laws'. The film is thus made in terms of definite problems as conceived by the Borrooloola people — land rights and welfare are dominant. Not only is it with their own voices that they speak, but they were involved in the process of film-making from start to finish including viewing a number of ethnographic and documentary films about indigenous peoples and seeing the complete run of rushes. The

film was shot on site in the Northern Territory, and can thus negotiate current problems and develop film-making strategies to best deal with them.

But information in these affairs can never be neutral, and film's mediatory role in getting information across is continually acknowledged. The film challenges notions of temporality, empirical forms of validation, notions of character development and its employment in psychologized accounts of the past (cf. *Women of the Sun*). The film bypasses familiar reliance on formal narrative structures, with their 'closed' problem/solution formula: instead we have an 'open', or rather 'unfinished' narrative structure, stressing ongoing processes and audience reflection rather than simple resolutions or the finished product.

With this sort of reading of films, the role of the audience is problematised as well as that of the filmic text itself. In films like *Two Laws* (a film of both political content and political address) the audience is situated in relation to a certain Aboriginal discourse on issues like landrights, and a sympathetic broadly left-wing discourse which tries to interact usefully with it. In other films, such as many feature films and the series *Women of the Sun* (without Pat O'Shane), the audience is situated as one which is in passive acceptance of entertainment.

Lousy Little Sixpence, a recent documentary, made rather large claims for itself as a film intervening in a situation dominated by unsatisfactory film-making practices. The Directors were particularly scathing about *Two Laws* in an interview with Pat Fiske:

JERRY (Gerry Bostock): Two Laws to me was unethical, we had two film-makers giving the impression that the film was being made from a black point of view, that it was the Borroloola community making the film where in fact it wasn't, it was Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini who made the film, but who took pains in setting up certain shots to give the impression that the blacks were making the film...

ALEC (Morgan):... they spent twelve months by themselves in a room editing that film and yet they say 'the community made it'. What I think is the important thing for whites to get through is to stop treating Aborigines as some sort of strange animal. Sometimes the facts are really hard to comprehend — when I saw the film up on the screen last week, I'm suddenly saying 'that is a hard fact that in 1938 they were standing outside and calling for land rights' but it is a fact — I'm not putting theory in the film I'm just presenting facts. (Filmnews, October 1983: 11).

Despite Alec Morgan's disclaimer, he does have a theory of documentary: that it should present 'facts', a type of journalistic assertion that says nothing about the criteria by which these so-called facts are selected, nor about how the documentary is constructed.

One would not want to de-emphasize the valuable effect of *Lousy Little Sixpence* in bringing forward film archive material, and setting it up against present-day Aboriginal political struggles. Some subjects viewing the film may not have been aware of certain events, a middle-ground of Aboriginal history in the period between the wars. But how is this history being told? This film is certainly much more tightly structured than a collection of 'hard facts'. It employs the standard documentary devices of biography, autobiography, popular narrative history (the voice-over narration bridges those moments when archival footage is inserted into the narrative). These techniques are standard to films like *Union Maids*, much admired by Morgan:

The dynamics of the film work between the footage of the people you are interviewing and the material that is on film, archival film, photographs, etc. The best films that I have seen that worked in a dynamic way is where they have got that combination of good interviews and spectacular footage, such as Union Maids. (Filmnews, October 1983: 11)

'Good interviews' presumably means subjects who don't contradict a history already constituted: personal experience and anecdote merge with the popular history of the past giving the film a significance deriving from the present ('calling for land rights') in the same way described by Noel King for *Union Maids*:

These two trajectories then merge, the one of individualist life history, the other by collectivised national consciousness and in each case the movement is teleological: from a past to a present, from a point of origin or genesis along a causal chain until we reach the present The present becomes the point from which we can know the past The effect of employing such a familiar narrative system is that the origin always already contains the end. (1982: 12).

The 'dynamic' of *Lousy Little Sixpence* is not an historical dynamic, it is more 'spectacular' a juxtaposition of different kinds of images sutured by the voice of the (Aboriginal) narrator and unified and underpinned by an ideology of *authentic experience*. It is enough for the people interviewed to recount their experience, for it is the experience which counts unproblematically, not the way in which it is represented or mediated by language or the filmic codes. King again:

A series of witnesses are unanswerable in their existential authenticity; they are constructed as incontrovertible within a textual system which effectively forecloses any possibility of dialogue and analysis ... The interview format in Union Maids constructs a notion of history as experienced by subjects but the film has nothing to say about the rules which construct interviews and subjects in and for interviews. (1982: 14)

Morgan and Bostock, who were critical of the attempts at technical innovation in *Two Laws*, have produced a film which is virtually

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identical in its techniques to a dominant form of documentary-making [*Union Maids*). Its investment is not in changing practices of film-making, but in providing a particular historical *content* ('suppressed for generations, now the hidden history is told', says the advertising pamphlet). History, in this instance, is read cathartically as moments of dramatic *release* in personal anecdotes ('quiet and ironic passion', says John Baxter of *The Australian*, endorsing the film; 'a powerful and ... shocking contribution to the building of an Aboriginal history' says Meaghan Morris of the *Financial Review*, quietly and ironically, [both on the advertising pamphlet]).

Another film, one which is particularly guilty of failing to address its audience in a way useful to any cause, is *Sons of Namatjira*. (Curtis Levy for the AIAS in 1975). The film starts inside a bus, a tourist bus. What better way would there be to transport a discourse of populism to Alice Springs? The first voice is that of the bus driver/guide introducing the home of the famous Aboriginal landscape painter, Albert Namatjira. Now dead, his home has been converted into some sort of museum. Why does the film adopt this populist mode of taking us to the site 'just like any tourist'? The film has failed to state its intentions — this narrative beginning establishes nothing except a banal position for the viewing subject to occupy: the back of a bus, unlikely to be a visual pun.

In the next scene in which the tourists are interviewed, populism is maintained with the current affairs 'vox pop' strategy of gaining a truth-effect by randomly selecting an average human subject. At

this stage, the film is revealed as a documentary; according to a general rule for this genre the words anchor the images; what is seen comes into line with what is said in voice-over. The populism, and its refusal to be partisan in relation to certain issues, also demands that the interviewer, in a series of banal questions, refuse to contest the blatantly racist statements of the subjects being interviewed:

Excuse me, can I just ask you if you know anything about Albert Namatjira? (...)

He liked comfort didn't he? It's quite a solid building ... you don't expect it to be quite so comfortable inside, do you?

Do you think he would have had a happy life?

(Woman) Well to himself I suppose he was... happy.

(Man) Before he was famous, yes. But after he was famous, no.

(Woman) He died more or less a broken-hearted man, didn't he, so they tell us, on the bus. The bus-driver said...

(Man) Well he couldn't comply with two civilizations, his own and ours...

The critical problem for this sort of exchange is how to *read* it. Given that, in 1975 as much as now, there were dominant *racist* dis-

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courses on Aborigines circulating, then these are confirmed by these kinds of statements which make assumptions about what sort of living conditions to expect for Blacks, and about the inability to 'cope' with two cultures — this results in romantic tragedy, especially in the case of the artist. It is only the populist convention in the making of documentaries which prevents the film-maker from directly challenging these assertions. But a second reading is marginally possible. As the film-maker is working for the AIAS, and this is an institution which purportedly supports enlightened and non-racist research, then he is perhaps assuming a similarly enlightened audience which, in the previous sequence, will read the racism and thereby be roughly informed about its presence among tourists. But one showing for the general public which we heard about was at the PIFT (Perth Institute of Film and Television) in the context of *Aboriginal Arts '83* in April of that year. Nothing about the context of this showing secures either a racist or a non-racist reading: it rather suggests that, in a festival of *Aboriginal arts*, that the film is to be read in relation to its subject matter: *Aboriginal painting*.

In fact, in the interview just discussed, the aesthetic is taken up very quickly as a topic to be validated by a 'scenic' pan shot of the country. An anonymous tourist's words have the power to divert the camera in the direction of the hills — a technique which makes the camera (the film) subservient to populism:

(Female tourist) '... I actually come from Canada but I, I know him (Namatjira) very well... and this is why I'm here really, just to see the sort of country (CAMERA PANS) that he painted. It's very beautiful I know that he had a family of sons who also painted...'

These *voices* are the ones which introduce us to Namatjira's family in the next sequence. Now we can no longer hear what is said — only mumbling in camp as the camera approaches from afar. What follows

then is a series of exchanges between whites and the Namatjira brothers. Again the problem of reading. Are we supposed to immediately recognize the racism of the whites negotiating for sales of paintings? If we do, what then? The interviewer's techniques of negotiation certainly don't provide an alternative model. Film cannot *show* instances of racism to what it *may* assume is a non-racist audience, and expect by its agency to thus magically eliminate it. It needs to identify the problem (by uttering the word 'racism' for instance) and then start to negotiate its effects, the institutional practices that make it a way of life for people who negotiate with Aborigines, and the economic and cultural conditions which make it possible.

But as well as failing to identify the working of racism, the film also perpetuates it in other ways. In an interview with Keith Namatjira, the film-maker discusses painting as a way of making a living:

How much a week would you be making from your paintings?

How much, about three or four hundred a week... (inaudible) Where does all your three or four hundred a week go?

Some groceries, some cool drinks for the kids, ice-cream, cigarettes... get a little bit of beer or something...

(SILENCE. CUT TO PAN SHOT OF SHELTER WITH FIRE, RUBBISH, BEER CANS, FLAGONS).

This interrogation about the household budget is loaded in favour of a racist reading. The interviewer assumes that there are no savings. 'Where does *all your* three or four hundred dollars go?' Furthermore, and this may have come in at the editing stage, the mention of the word 'beer' is- enough to stop the interview so that the audience can be treated to a shot of the 'morning after' — perhaps. The silence does not give us any idea how to interpret the images. What it does is activate an explanation which lies quite outside documentaries: the dominant racist discourse which pertains to Aborigines and alcohol.

These are just some of the things that make this film a potentially racist document: an unmediated presentation of material which *could* be construed as racist by a non-racist viewer, a populist framing of the film which also remains uncontested, a failure to discuss living conditions and to discuss painting as a viable economic endeavour — these things tend to be elided by the presentation of the effects of drinking — the camera finds an empty beer can, the interviewer arbitrarily conveys to us that someone lost his driver's licence as a result of drinking. Silence intervenes where dominant racist interpretations should be challenged. Silence also occupies the syntagmatic position of the narrator's voice. But the absence of a narrator does not guarantee equal time for the participants in the dialogues. The speakers of Aboriginal English sometimes need sub-titles, the interviewers set the agendas and maintain linguistic control, and other white participants 'talk over' their interlocutors.

These are film-making strategies to which, not even years ago, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was not immune. The film continues to be circulated for public viewing and it is used in educational institutions and in training programmes for Aborigines. What would be intriguing to know is the *use* to which it is put. We hope we have shown that if it is shown unaccompanied by a critical discourse it will undoubtedly contribute to the reproduction of racism as it informs the most common cinematic representations of Aborigines in Australia. What its circulation in institutional contexts seems to proclaim is the need for widespread media education.

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Notes

1. See Bennett (1982) and Stam and Spence (1983).

2. See MacBean (1983) for an account of the 1978 International Ethnographic Film Conference in Canberra.
3. See Moore (1982).
4. *CharUs Perkins* (ABC, 1967) and *Man in the Middle* (BBC, 1967).
5. See Cavadini, et al, (1981) for a discussion of collectivity in relation to film-making in an Aboriginal community.

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