Rethinking Visual Anthropology

Edited by
Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy

Yale University Press
New Haven and London

9

A body painting in translation[1]

Françoise Dussart

> The approach to art from the side of Western aesthetics . . . and indeed from any sort of prior formalism, blinds us to the very existence of the data upon which a comparative understanding of it could be built. And we are left, as we used to be in studies of totemism, caste, or bride-wealth – and still are in structuralist ones – with an externalized conception of the phenomenon supposedly under intense inspection but actually not even in our line of sight.
>
> (Geertz 1983: 98)

Introduction

The commodification of visual representation produced by Fourth World people has increasingly gained the attention of anthropologists. Building on the pioneer works of Maquet (1986) and Graburn (1976), researchers have intensified their analysis of the effects of the consumption of non-Western art by the West. Such analyses among Australian Aborigines have proved particularly rich. Williams (1976), Megaw (1982), Morphy (1980, 1983, 1991), Taylor (1987), Michaels (1988), Sutton (1988), von Sturmer (1989) and Myers (1989, 1994a, 1994b) all explore the social and economic implications of Aboriginal art, both for Aborigines and society at large.

The Warlpiri residing at Yuendumu, an Aboriginal settlement located some 300 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs, expressing as they do a richly visual and dynamic ceremonial life, have long been the focus of such external attention. Their body designs, sand paintings, ritual performance, and acrylic representations of the cosmology known as the Dreaming increasingly attract the scrutiny of filmmakers, art critics, curators and anthropologists. In fact, art production now represents the principal non-governmental source of revenue for the settlement, dramatically modifying the role of iconographic representation in the construction of Warlpiri social identity.

In this chapter, I propose to analyse a single Aboriginal body painting design performed by women in three media: the traditional surface (i.e. the torso), acrylic on canvas, and celluloid film. Understanding how the visual artistic system and the meanings associated with that system undertake translations from one medium to another offers insight into the Warlpiri ritual domain and forces the anthropologist to reassess the intercultural dynamic between the Aboriginal residents of Yuendumu and a public that stretches around the world.

From Dreamtime to torso: the first translation

The ritual life of the Warlpiri – a repertoire of Dreamtime stories sung, danced and painted – links the individual both to the land from which the Dreaming emerges, and to the kin group responsible for its maintenance. As such, the performance of ceremony serves as a kind of social, geographic and cosmological mastic, and provides an arena in which many non-ritual issues find expression. The act of drawing a circle or a set of lines on the torso of a woman – a procedure restricted to the ceremonial performance – reifies the nature of negotiation found at the core of Warlpiri notions of social exchange.

I would like to begin my analysis by describing what a body painting can say and how it can be said. I take as my model a single design recounting the Fire Dreaming at Ngarna. The traditional public version of this Dreamtime story involves two mythical brothers and their father, a blue tongue lizard. The story recounts the brothers' inadvertent transgression of a taboo, and the subsequent punishment by the father who 'sings' a magical fire to immolate them. The two brothers ultimately die in a secret cave south of Ngarna, a sacred site to the west of Yuendumu.

This Fire Dreaming evokes three of the many Ancestral Beings who emerged in the Dreamtime, a period during which the world was physically shaped and the social and moral orders were instituted. Warlpiri people believe that when their ancestors were asleep Ancestral Beings came to them to tell them how people should live. Much of the knowledge transmitted focused on rules of ceremonial performance, procedures by which marvellous acts performed by the Ancestral Beings could be re-enacted. The revelations are, following Ricœur's terminology, 'texts of narrated dreams' (1970: 5), and are translated by the Warlpiri people when they enact mythical events in their paintings, dances and songs. The nature of this translation varies most obviously along lines of gender, but is further informed by the variables as well of kinship, age and personal authority.

To understand the plurality of these variables one must first understand the complex nature of negotiations by which the painting is itself produced.

Body paintings, traditionally applied, can be placed on the upper torso of both men and women using a variety of natural pigments: red

and yellow ochre, pipe clay and charcoal. A base of animal fat (baby oil in recent years) is applied to give the body a glistening look that the Warlpiri associate with health and beauty (*marrka*). The Warlpiri maintain that the shimmering effect of a painting evokes the qualities engendered by Ancestral Beings who first applied these designs on their own bodies in the Dreamtime.

There are a number of gender-specific techniques in the creation of traditional body designs. Women limit themselves to ochres and oil, while men often dot themselves with such additional materials as animal down and vegetable fibre. This distinction must be noted because, as I will show later, acrylic adaptations of the body designs combined the techniques of men and women, even though it is only women who actually produced acrylic paintings employing body motifs. For their acrylics, Warlpiri men mainly adapt designs taken from ritual object and ground paintings. Though some elements of the Fire Dreaming body painting of men differ from those of women, basic symbols remain invariant. The iconographic compositions of both employ circles, semicircles, lines, footprints, and meanders (see Munn 1973: 112). As is true of all body paintings, Fire Dreaming designs are all geospecific and associated with specific actions of the Ancestral Beings.

A body painting, traditionally performed, is only meant to last the duration of a ceremony, which never stretches more than half a day. In conjunction with songs and dances, body design enables the Warlpiri to call up the powers of the Ancestral Beings. When the ceremonies are

Figure 9.1 Judy Nampijinpa Granites and Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels, both *kirda*, dancing the final scene of the Fire Dreaming at Ngarna under the supervision of Ema Nungarrayi, a *kurdungurlu* for the Fire Dreaming at Ngarna.

over, the Warlpiri efface the design so that these powers do not remain. It is important to stress that the body painting derives its potency from this ritual context, and that an essential aspect of its execution is its temporary nature.

In its production, a traditional body painting represents a negotiation that connects the painted and the painter. The act also forms a connection between individual and other kin members, Ancestral Beings and the land inhabited by both. To bear the designs of the Ngarna Fire Dreaming, men and women must hold paternal rights (*kirda*) or maternal rights (*kurdungurlu*) to the Dreaming, or obtain permission from someone who holds rights as *kirda*.[2] Siblings, whether male or female, inherit these rights in the same way. *Kirda* have the rights and responsibilities to acquire knowledge, to pass it on and to perform ceremonies reenacting the Dreamtime stories they inherited, and *kurdungurlu* must make sure that ceremonies are performed 'correctly'. Thus, for any given site and Dreamtime story there is an interconnected set of *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*. Some exceptions to this kin-based control of rights do exist. An extremely skilled painter – one capable of applying 'correct' (*junga*) designs 'from the Dreamtime' (*kuruwarri*) – will be granted the right to paint certain Dreamings even if the requisite kin ties to the associated site are lacking. The Warlpiri consider such 'correctness', and the accompanying fidelity to notions of the proper representation of the Dreaming, a means of enhancing the potency (*wiri*) of Ancestral Powers (see Munn 1973).

Negotiation extends beyond the rights to paint or be painted. Also at issue are the levels of meaning that individuals are allowed to possess for the painting that is produced. The Fire Dreaming at Ngarna contains a variety of interpretations, even when the pattern remains the same. Furthermore, the changed context for a ceremony may provide additional meanings known only to certain *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*.

The public story I sketched out earlier offers the most rudimentary and public elements of the Fire Dreaming story. Additional information is known to those ritual leaders who are active in maintaining the ceremonial life of the settlement. To give one example, the fate of the two brothers who are put to death by fire is modified in the story known to male initiates. This alternative version of the story is exchanged as a commodity in an environment which treats all such ritual knowledge as power. Certain elder women at Yuendumu may know this male secret version but are prohibited from revealing it or even admitting their knowledge. As such they cannot use it in ritual exchanges that are at the core of the Warlpiri ceremonial life (Dussart 1988, 1992).

All this suggests that traditionally applied body paintings reflect a complex system of collaboration involving kinship, gender, ritual exchange, and displays of technical skill, a system that has parallels outside Warlpiri culture. Similar issues of negotiation have been described

among the Pintupi (Myers 1989), the Kunwinjku (Taylor 1987) and the Yolngu (Morphy 1991). As Morphy eloquently notes in his study of the Yolngu artistic system: 'Because art encodes meaning in the context of a system of revelatory knowledge, we must consider not only "what it means" but "to whom it means"'(1991: 216). There are, of course, many more nuances in the creation of the body painting, but for an analysis of a mediated visual system of representation, this schematic overview is sufficient.

From torso to canvas: the second translation

Morphy's quotation offers an apt transition to an analysis of the Fire Dreaming in its second translation, when it moves from torso to canvas for sale to non-Warlpiri buyers. This newly mediated artwork raises profound, sometimes troubling questions about the economic and ritual life of the Warlpiri. It also offers insights into the diversity of interpretations the visual representation can generate both within and beyond the settlement. This mediation between two cultures should come as no surprise since acrylic painting employs the materials of one culture and the visual system of another.

Though the Warlpiri at Yuendumu sporadically painted their designs for commercial purposes as early as circa 1960, they only began to paint acrylic canvases of their ritual designs in 1983, some ten years after the Pintupi, Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri residing in the neighbouring settlement of Papunya pioneered the technique. The Yuendumu paintings sold well almost immediately and major exhibitions were organised quickly throughout Australia. In 1985, with the approval of the Warlpiri painters and the guidance of an adult educator, a company was set up called Warlukurlangu Artists Association. Aboriginal and state agencies provided grants to pay an art adviser and an art coordinator to organise and distribute supplies to painters, and to document 'the story' associated with the paintings. It was assumed, rightly, that such accompanying texts would stimulate sales to tourists, art galleries or museums worldwide.

From the beginning, the acrylic paintings served two purposes. There was, of course, the obvious financial compensation that came from sales of the work. Acrylic painting was, and still is, as a source of income second only to the social benefit checks provided by the Australian state. Concomitant with the economic incentives, acrylic representation of the Dreamtime affirmed the richness of Warlpiri culture. Though the nature of this affirmation has undergone change, the acrylics continue to be a means by which the Warlpiri undertake a form of social dialogue with the world outside the settlement. The Warlpiri expect that showing their paintings will make the world beyond Yuendumu 'care' and recognise the importance of their life and culture.[3]

Figure 9.2 (*left*) Close-up of Dolly Nampijinpa displaying a coolamon painted with the Fire Dreaming at Ngarna. In the background, Kumanjayi Nungarrayi, Lorna Napurrurla, Bessie Nakamarra, and Biddy Napanangka are painting wooden objects and canvases for sale, Yuendumu, 1983.

Figure 9.3 Women and young girls dancing with traditional objects and boards painted with acrylics during the visit of Minister of Aboriginal Affairs on 25 September 1984 to manifest their objections to potential legislation change for Aboriginal access to traditional Aboriginal land.

The first painters came exclusively from a pool of older initiates, both men and women, who actively maintained the ritual life of Yuendumu. The creation of acrylics adapted the collaborative nature of traditional ceremonial techniques to the new medium. In the first months of acrylic production, the painters, while painting in and for non-ritual contexts, rigorously maintained the patterns of ceremonial collaboration between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu*. This changed, however, as the number of

painters increased. The collaboration between *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* was overwhelmed by new patterns of assistance that relied on spousal and kin associations. Co-residentiality reconfigured the methods by which the Fire Dreaming found representation.[4] There were rules, however, even as the medium changed.

An acrylic painting must begin with the selection of a background paint colour. The choices are generally limited to red, brown or black – colours that evoke the ground and the body. After the surface of the canvas is covered, the painters apply the main symbols associated with the segment of the Dreaming they wish (and are allowed) to evoke. Though the artists use brushes instead of their fingers, other elements of the procedure maintain a tie to traditional enactment. As with designs made during ritual ceremonies, precise and well-defined symbols are highly valued; the clarity of a design enhances its spiritual potency. Not surprisingly, the skilful artists who perform in the ritual milieu often find a prominent place in acrylic production as well. These painters can use an extremely large pallet of colours to dot areas of the canvas that are not taken up by the narrative symbols that tell the tale of the two brothers. The colours are generally chosen to display a vibrancy that the Warlpiri believe mirrors the shimmering qualities of their traditional surface. In fact, fluorescent paint is usually favoured by many painters.

Still, a number of crucial distinctions must be made between a corporeal painting and one that appears on canvas. There is, first of all, the matter of permanence. As I mentioned earlier, ritual body designs are not intended to survive more than a few hours, and never outlive the ceremony in which they are created. The acrylic works, devoid of ceremonial purpose, serve as a fixed register of the Warlpiri artistic system, but lack ritual power. On the practical level of production, another distinction must be made involving the patterned use of 'dots'. Though dots do not figure in the traditional body design of women, they do appear on the canvas adaptations. The reason for this modification offers an insight into the gender-based exchange among the Warlpiri that predates the acrylic movement. At the end of the 1970s, senior men gave senior women the right to use dotted backgrounds – an adaptation of the feathers and vegetable down traditionally restricted to male body paintings – for commercial, non-ceremonial purposes.

Nevertheless, certain patterns of exchange are rigorously maintained. Acrylic designs that recompose and combine significant segments of Warlpiri iconography from ritual objects and ground paintings involve extensive negotiation and require the approval of knowledgeable kin group elders before they can be painted. The artist who combines various Dreaming segments without approval of other *kirda* risks censure and punishment through acts of sorcery. When such unacceptable paintings are discovered, they are generally effaced or modified. Not to do so would threaten the balance of kinship relations.

To avoid potential conflict, many painters decided early on to restrict the acrylic repertoire to public designs. This had an unexpected impact on gender relations. Because women possess many more representations viewable by the uninitiated[5] they were far less restricted in the patterns they could paint for sale. Women found themselves with a measure of autonomy and power until men created public versions of their restricted designs.

It is important to note here that the Warlpiri acrylic movement has transformed the gender status of visual representation. When Nancy Munn conducted her fieldwork in the 1950s, prior to the development of the acrylic art market, she observed that the public body designs painted by women lacked the potency of men's secret designs. Secrecy was, during Munn's stay at Yuendumu, the principal criterion in the assessment of a design's ritual efficacy. This notion of potency has undergone change, however, with the creation of an acrylic art market. The public nature of the designs no longer suggests impotence. On the contrary, public display has become a way of reifying personal authority in the ritual domain. In addition to the issue of the public expression of ritual in the social interaction of the settlement, acrylic body designs have often provided a measure of personal autonomy for the female artists. Because body paintings require less negotiation than many other designs, it is possible to retain much of the economic proceeds generated through the sale of an acrylic, and thus mitigate many of the redistributive pressures common to contemporary egalitarian societies (Woodburn 1982, Myers 1986).

It is against this backdrop that Molly Nampijinpa Langdon painted her small canvas in 1984 (Fig. 9.4).

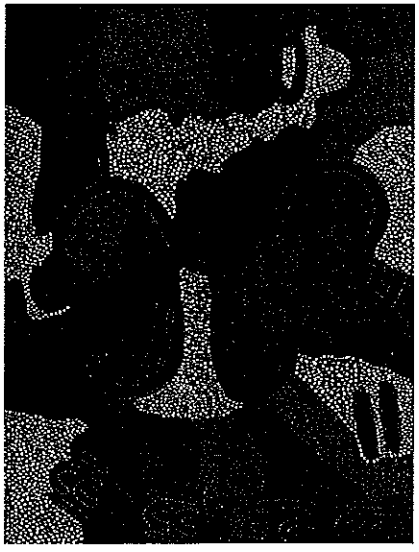

Figure 9.4 Fire Dreaming at Ngarna painted on canvas by Molly Nampijinpa Langdon, Yuendumu, 1984, 60.5 × 45.7 cm.

As I explained at the outset of this chapter, the acrylic design adapts a segment of the Fire Dreaming iconography applied to the body during a ceremony. The central motif on the acrylic replicates the patterns that Molly has had painted on her body and has painted on the bodies of her sisters, her brother's daughters, and her father's sisters in ritual context. However, the semi-circles and lines surrounding the central motifs do not serve as part of the traditional body design as such. These border symbols are adapted from publicly displayed ground paintings executed by male *kirda* for the Fire Dreaming. Molly was able to apply these supplemental motifs without negotiation because she previously obtained the knowledge required to reproduce them from one of her elder brothers.

Why did Molly paint the Fire Dreaming? Certainly, the possibility of selling the canvas for cash was a central factor in the decision. But this in no way explains why *that* Dreaming was chosen. According to numerous artists, including Molly, body painting designs were initially selected not only because of their public status, but for reasons of non-indigenous 'accessibility' as well. The artists believed that the patterns were so obviously allied to the shape of the human form that they would naturally appeal to non-Aboriginal buyers sensitive to a so-called 'figurative' tradition in the visual arts. (It should be noted that the modification of traditional iconography is not prompted solely by external commodification. The early record of the Central Desert dot-painting movement seems to suggest that the foreignness of the material itself – the acrylics and canvases – even when unconnected to intercultural transaction, stimulated 'figurative' experimentation in ritual design.[6])

This effort to engage the non-Aboriginal buyer with what the Aboriginal artists believe to be a more 'representational' work is not unique to Yuendumu. Bark painters from Western Arnhem land also decided to produce for sale forms of rock painting iconography that non-Aborigines would consider 'more figurative' (Taylor 1987). While this strategy proved successful for the Kunwinjku bark painters, it was ultimately rejected by the Yuendumu artists. Less than a year after Molly painted her small canvas, body designs no longer appeared in the repertoire of acrylic production. This decision was prompted by the artists' discovery that buyers of their work were unable to recognise the corporeal origins of the designs. It would be easy to assert that the artists were simply responding to market forces, but that is not completely true. Though body paintings sold well among non-Aborigines, the artists expressed a sense of frustration that their Dreamings and the stories associated with their Dreamings were not being 'recognised' by purchasers. As a result, the artists moved in one of two directions. They either intensified their efforts to make more 'representational' what had always been sufficiently representational to them. This was accomplished by substituting images of leaves where icons of leaves once appeared, placing trees previously filled with circles, and applying goannas in lieu

of the symbolic representation of the desert reptile. The other tack taken when faced by non-indigenous incomprehension was to accept the impossibility of communicating the public Dreamtime stories, and to make paintings that contained symbolic significance acknowledged to be far beyond the scope of the uninitiated. The return of the body painting to its original design was emblematic of a deepened understanding by the Warlpiri of the limits of cross-cultural communication.

Now that body paintings are no longer produced on acrylic, the early autonomy of women painters has undergone noteworthy change. The newer designs, relying more heavily on iconography that require greater cross-gender consultation on matters of correctness has meant an increase in spousal assistance and collaboration, for the completion of the background motifs, which the artists have always considered a tedious part of the process. As such, acrylic production continues to serve as a dynamic arena of exchange between men and women, between various kin groups, and between the Warlpiri and the world at large.

In lieu of body designs, women now adapt the patterns found on other traditional surfaces (i.e. the earth,[7] wood) to their acrylic canvases. This diminution in the repertoire has meant that men's designs and women's designs display more iconographic similarity than they did in the early days of production. Furthermore, the increased collaboration between genders, wherein the brothers and husbands regularly allow their public designs to enter the repertoire of women's acrylics, has meant that designs that were once gender-specific now can share many visual elements. More important, the ways in which men and women think about, plan, narrate and execute designs increasingly overlaps.

I have, throughout this chapter, avoided the term audience when describing non-Aboriginal viewers. This is because while some sophisticated Westerners might *see* certain narrative elements in designs, almost none can sense the auditory, olfactory and sensory experience that attends the creation of designs in a ceremonial context. When Molly's body is painted with natural pigment, the creation is always accompanied by songs associated with the Dreaming design. This singing is obviously absent from the decontextualised painting that appears on acrylic, viewed under the artificial light of the gallery. Absent, too, is the painting's geospecific nature. Numerous efforts have been made to recontextualise the acrylic canvas in the setting of production. Nearly a dozen documentary films have attempted to 'explain' acrylics. Though the Warlpiri themselves have experimented with video cameras, they have not, to my knowledge, directed the camera lens at acrylic production. There is, however, a 28-minute promotional video by a non-Aboriginal Australian filmmaker that attempts to register the process. Produced between 1990 and 1991, the film was made at the request of a few Warlpiri painters and two non-Warlpiri art advisers. It was their hope that the film would generate international interest in acrylic painting. I

do not, at this point, wish to analyse reactions of non-Aboriginal people to the film, or attempt to assess its economic impact. Rather, I am interested in the response of the Warlpiri themselves to a film. By exploring the Warlpiri assessment of the film, we can further understand how cultural identity is modified and lost in translation. Listening to the reactions of the Warlpiri forces us to reject the standard language of 'capturing' images on film. Far from being 'captured', meaning is dissipated in *Warlukurlangu: Artists of Yuendumu*. Worse than dissipated in fact. Another phrase may be more accurately used to explain what happens in the film: the body painting is disembodied, at least, this is the perspective of the subjects of the film.

From torso to film: the third translation

Warlukurlangu: Artists of Yuendumu was made by a filmmaker with long experience in filming the Aboriginal people of Central Australia. Intended as a marketing tool, the film was ultimately translated into a number of languages including French and German. Although the painters featured in this film gave approval for the filming, they had little control over the eventually distributed version.

In its uncut form, the film captures a great deal of unexploited, untranslated information, and offers insights into the dynamics of ceremonial performance. The filmmaker embraces certain anthropological techniques of fieldwork, and then edits them out of the film. Though he subjects the artists to a battery of questions, only their answers remain in the final print. The artists are placed in the role of informant, with the identity of the interviewer suppressed. For the potential art buyer it serves as a cryptic piece of promotion; for the anthropologist who speaks Warlpiri and knows the geography in which the film was shot, it is an opportunity to study conflicting intentions; but to the Warlpiri themselves, the film is a 'mistranslation' of a world they wish to share.[8]

The film shows a number of Yuendumu painters – both men and women – applying ritual designs to a variety of surfaces: their bodies, the ground and, of course, canvas. The camera zooms in and out between close-up shots of the symbols and wider views that register the methods of production. Interspersed among these images are shots of the land to which the designs are tied. The film does add a crucial quality in design production absent when viewing acrylics: the ceremonial context. Shown are portions of dances and songs that accompany the creation of designs, including the Fire Dreaming of Ngarna.

The film does not attempt to address the impact of acrylic painting on the settlement, its intention is to let the painters 'speak'. As such, there is no narration. The only voices heard are from the participants in the film. Though it is the artists who take up most of the footage, there are

occasional observations from one of the settlement's non-Aboriginal art advisers offering a potted history of the 'movement', and comments from two enthusiastic museum curators from Germany, coincidentally present during the filming.

The manner in which the filmmaker chooses to represent the Fire Dreaming is worth describing in some detail. The very first image of the film, though not identified, is a close-up of a body painting of the Fire Dreaming. When the film shows the ceremonial activities required to perform the Fire Dreaming, one Warlpiri woman, Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels, offers a great deal of information about her relationship to the Dreamtime story she will enact. She is then seen painting and singing. While the camera moves from one painted torso to another, Dolly's words appear at the bottom of the screen: 'This is the Bush Fire Dreaming. We are dancing for this one. When we paint we don't do other people's paintings. We do our own, from our father's and grandfather's country.' She thus notes the pattern of inheritance through patrilineal descent that is more likely than not lost on the viewer. Dolly is later seen 'reading' her body painting for the filmmaker. She is also asked to itemise the symbols for an imagined non-Aboriginal viewer, a procedure to which she regularly submits, sought after as she is by linguists, anthropologists, curators and art advisers. She is cognizant that such 'readings' provide a superficial answer to the polyvalent question so often asked by non-Aborigines, 'What does it mean?' The first symbol she points to is a circle which represents the Blue Tongue Lizard who sings the Magical Fire. She explains while facing the camera: 'This one, this circle here, the Blue Tongue Lizard has been here. Then we have the Fire Stick here, these here are the bush fire and these two are the two Jangalas [the two sons].' As the camera pulls away from her body painting to an acrylic painting, Dolly states for the viewer the source of her learning and why she can learn to paint the Fire Dreaming:[9] 'My auntie Nangala [one of Dolly's father's sisters], she told me: "This is your country, you can have this painting, in the memory."' Later the camera gives the viewers a glimpse of two women performing segments of the Fire Dreaming. When the women stop suddenly and lie down on the ground, Dolly says, 'the two Jangalas are finished now'. By 'finished' Dolly means to evoke the immolation of the two Dreamtime sons, but this connection is never made explicit.

Highly edited and decontextualised, the substance of Dolly's statements remain, cryptic to those unfamiliar with Aboriginal culture. What Dolly states and what ultimately gets communicated are very different, and so the ethnographer and the uninformed viewer will have different responses to Dolly's account of the Fire Dreaming.

Crucial information contained in Dolly's account is often not offered in the film's subtitles. Let me give three examples. First, while the camera zooms in and out from women's painted bodies during the singing of

a Dreaming, the link between the song and the design is never made explicit, thus losing the auditory nature of 'seeing' a body painting. Second, though the women make the point that they are the 'owners' of the Dreaming being sung, their proprietary control is never made clear by the filmmaker. The third unsubtitled comment comes from a performer who states that it is a hot day and that as a result the ground was very hot.[10] Such an assertion has totemic resonance for the participants. It implies a link to the pain felt by the two mythical brothers when walking on the ground inhabited by the heat of the Magical Fire sent after them by their father before they died by immolation. In fact at no point in the film is the story of the Fire Dreaming told to the viewers. These omissions say more about the filmmaker than they do about those filmed. To quote Banks: 'Ethnographicness is not a thing out there which is captured by the camera but a thing we construct for ourselves in our relation to film (as well as in relation to a variety of other things, such as fieldwork)' (1992: 127).

Though the filmmaker had been told versions of the story of the Fire Dreaming many times before and during the shooting, little attempt is made to help the viewer understand what is being viewed. I need to reiterate here that paintings do not tell a story. They are a *key* to a story. Therefore, Dolly's itemisation of some symbols of her body painting only hints at the multi-levelled and plural 'readings' a Dreamtime story can have. And while the filmmaker spent a great deal of energy shooting the sites associated with Dreamtime stories, he never clarified for the non-specialists the geospecificity of the body designs, the link between the sacred site of Ngarna and the Fire Dreaming. We only see two unidentified women performing a short dance in the desert. Why are they performing in the bush and not in their village? What are they dancing? Why do they lie down? Who are they representing? Why is Dolly's body painting the same as the two dancers? Are they all painted for the Fire Dreaming? Did they all inherit their rights to paint and be painted from their fathers and grandfathers as Dolly stated? None of these questions is addressed. As a result, the complexity of kinship rights, responsibilities and negotiations – issues central to Warlpiri cosmology – are buried or edited out, unstated or unexplained.

Because I had the opportunity to be present when certain Warlpiri women first viewed the edited film, I would like to touch upon the comments they made. All the women who watched the final version had previously seen the uncut version of the film. While the unedited footage respected the chronology of events, the final film undermined any notion of linearity, a temporal rupture that greatly surprised and confused the women. They wondered why the whole ceremony for the Fire Dreaming they had performed had been sliced into pieces and represented fragmentarily.

Dolly Nampijinpa Daniels and Uni Nampijinpa, two principal actors in the film (they are *kirda* for the Fire Dreaming) both speculated that viewers would be more impressed with the film if they had seen the dances for the Fire Dreaming in their entirety. Uni's initial reaction to the first image of the film – the completed body painting – was summarised in one word '*kuntangka*' which expressed surprise and shame at the same time. She wondered why the symbols on her body were taken so dramatically out of context, and why only parts of her torso were exposed. This created the troubling image of a decapitated body, a sense of disembodiment. Giddens reflects on this sense of disempowerment when he describes a culture and individuals being deprived of the right 'to make certain "accounts count" and to enact or resist sanctioning processes' (1979: 83). After they watched the edited film, gravely disappointed, the women returned their attentions to the unedited footage, which they considered a more accurate form of self-representation.[11] The edited film was ultimately approved for distribution beyond Yuendumu by the principal participants, members of two co-residential kin groups who not only dominated the filming but whose power extends to other contexts of intercultural exchange as well.[12] This prompted intra-Warlpiri conflict; two women unconnected to Ngarna argued that the film did not represent them or their Dreamings, they further accused the *kirda* and *kurdungurlu* of Ngarna of being insensitive to other ritual leaders, and of misrepresenting the diversity of the Dreaming repertoire. None of this internal conflict – a crucial component of how ritual is enacted – appeared in the film. The contested nature of kin group representation, so central to the Warlpiri at Yuendumu, disappears once the film leaves the settlement. This is reinforced by the sudden appearance of two German museum curators who offer non-indigenous testimony toward the end of the film. They linger on the 'spirituality' of the designs, and ignore completely the artists' concerns, many of which are in the film itself. The experts then advance a Eurocentric notion of aesthetics that side-steps the issue of translation by situating the acrylics in a universal visual language vaguely labelled 'contemporary'.[13]

Conclusion

As I hope this chapter has made clear, the translations of Dreamtime myth on to torso, on to canvas, and into film register more than the dynamic interaction between the Warlpiri and non-Aborigines. These adaptations register significant exchanges taking place among the Warlpiri themselves. The paintings clarify contemporary gender and kinship relations and serve as a locus of social exchanges. Molly's small canvas and the film's depiction of Dolly's body painting both reveal countless expressions of Warlpiri social identity. They evince ties to the land, to each other, to ancestors and to Dreamings that imbue their

culture. To paint one's dreaming is to maintain one's rights and to profess one's knowledge.

When body paintings move beyond Yuendumu their meanings enter a discursive state shaped by the viewer and artist. Out of this intercultural flux emerge notions of 'Aboriginality' that undergo constant redefinition (see Ginsburg 1993). This process of redefinition is not restricted to non-Aboriginal people. As Marcia Langton has noted, '"Aboriginality" [is] a social *thing* in the Durkheimian sense. It arises from the experience of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through mediated experience such as a White person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book' (1993: 81). To Langton's list we must add the representations of the Fire Dreaming at Ngarna.

Notes

1. I am grateful to those who commented on earlier versions of this paper presented at the ASA (Oxford) and at the AAA (Washington) in 1993, and I want to particularly thank Marcus Banks, Anne Marie Cantwell, Faye Ginsburg, Howard Morphy, Fred Myers, Janet Siskind, and Terry Turner for their insights. This paper has also greatly benefited from comments from Jim Faris, Nicolas Peterson, Allen Kurzweil and anonymous reviewers.
2. The Warlpiri system of acquisition of rights to the Dreaming and associated sites contains complexities that cannot be addressed in this paper. For a detailed exploration of kinship links at Yuendumu see Dussart 1988.
3. Attempts on the part of indigenous populations to establish ties to the non-Aboriginal world are not unique to the Yuendumu. Sutton (1978) working with Aboriginal residents of Cape Keerweer during a documentary film, and Myers (1986, 1989) in his study of acrylic production at Papunya and Kintore, make similar observations.
4. For more specific explanation of why traditional patterns of collaboration were transformed see Dussart 1989.
5. See Munn 1973: 36, 42.
6. See Megaw 1982: 206–208.
7. There are very few women's ground paintings performed today at Yuendumu. Those that generally are, are not done by the Warlpiri but by women who are *kirda* for countries associated with southern Aboriginal groups, such as the Anmatyerre.
8. The role of the viewer in film production, while outside the scope of this paper, presents a number of tangential issues worthy of study. See e.g. Worth and Adair 1972; Michaels 1986; Martinez 1992; Faris 1992; Asch 1992; Langton 1993; Ginsburg 1993.
9. The indigenous resistance to aesthetic explication has been noticed by many anthropologists such as Forge (1979) and Gell (1975). More recently, O'Hanlon convincingly demonstrates that an absence of *exegesis* is not the same as absence of verbalisation (1992). Here we may suggest that because so many anthropologists, art advisers, tourists, museum curators, etc. have asked Warlpiri people what their icons mean, painters understand that this kind of verbalisation is important, but return quickly to the way they 'talk' about their paintings. In other words, Dolly, like all Warlpiri people, is 'talking about' her painting when she verbalises her relationship to country, myth and other individuals, or when she sings the Dreamtime story associated with her designs on the body, on canvas or in a film.
10. Women are always barefoot when they perform ceremonies.
11. It must be noted that it is not the fact of editing, but the nature of the truncation that alienated the Warlpiri women. The same audience is keenly appreciative of highly produced video and film intended specifically for the Warlpiri. The women regularly watch edited educational tapes such as *Manyu-wana*, and do not like looking at the uncut versions.
12. For a lengthier discussion see Dussart 1994.
13. See Megaw 1982; Morphy 1983; Michaels 1988; Sutton 1992. Myers provides some of the most extensive analyses of ethnographic material on how and why the West engages with acrylic desert paintings and the impact such engagement has on the production of 'Aboriginality' (Myers 1989, 1991, 1994a, 1994b and 1995).

References

Asch, Timothy (1992) 'The Ethics of Ethnographic Film-making', in *Film As Ethnography*, ed. P. Crawford and D. Turton, Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology.

Banks, Marcus (1992) 'Which Films are the Ethnographic Films?' in *Film As Ethnography*, ed. P. Crawford and D. Turton, Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology.

Dussart, Françoise (1988) 'Warlpiri Women's Yawulyu Ceremonies: A Forum for Socialization and Innovation', PhD Thesis, Canberra: Australian National University.

— (1989) 'Rêves à l'acrylique', in *Australie noire: les Aborigènes, un peuple d'intellectuels*, ed. C. Merleau-Ponty and A. Tardy, Autrement, hors série 37: 104–11.

— (1992) 'Création et innovation', *Journal de la société des océanistes* 94(1): 25–34.

— (1994) 'Exhibitions of Identity: Warlpiri Women and the Performance of Public Ritual', paper presented at the European Society for Oceanists, Basel, Switzerland.

Faris, James (1992) 'Anthropological transparency: Film, Representation and Politics', in *Film As Ethnography*, ed. P. Crawford and D. Turton, Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology.

Forge, Anthony (1979) 'The Problem of Meaning in Art', in *Exploring the Visual Art of Oceania*, ed. S.M. Mead, Honolulu: Hawaii Press.

Geertz, Clifford (1983) *Local Knowledge*, New York, Basic Books.

Gell, Alfred (1975) *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries*, London: Athlone Press.

Giddens, Anthony (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ginsburg, Faye (1993) 'Aboriginal Media and the Australian Imaginary', *Public Culture* 5: 557–78.

Graburn, Nelson (ed.) (1976) *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Langton, Marcia (1993) 'Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television. . .', Sydney: Australia Film Commission.

Maquet, Jacques (1986) (3rd edn) *The Aesthetic Experience: An Anthropologist Looks at the Visual Arts*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press.

Martinez, Wilton (1992) 'Who Constructs Anthropological Knowledge? Toward a Theory of Ethnographic Film Spectatorship', in *Film As Ethnography*, ed. P. Crawford and D. Turton, Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology.

Megaw, Vincent (1982) 'Western Desert Acrylic Painting – Artifact or Art?' *Art history* 5: 205–18.

Michaels, Eric (1986) *The Aboriginal Invention of Television, Central Australia 1982–86*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Press.

— (1988) 'Bad Aboriginal Art', *Art and Text* 28: 59–72.

— (1989) 'For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla makes TV at Yuendumu', Sydney: Art and Criticism Monograph Series 3.
Morphy, Howard (1980) 'The Impact of the Commercial Development of Art on Traditional Culture', in *Preserving Indigenous Cultures: A New Role for Museums*, ed. R. Edwards and J. Stewart. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
— (1983) 'Aboriginal Fine Art, the Creation of Audiences and the Marketing of Art', in *Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market*, ed. P. Loveday and P. Cook, Darwin: North Australian Research Unit.
— (1991) *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Munn, Nancy (1973) *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Myers, Fred (1986) *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Washington, Canberra: Smithsonian Institution Press and Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
— (1989) 'Truth, Beauty, and Pintupi Painting', *Visual Anthropology*, 2: 163–95.
— (1991) 'Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s)', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, ed. E. Levin, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
— (1994a) 'Beyond the Intentional Fallacy: Art Criticism and the Ethnography of Aboriginal Acrylic Painting', *Cultural Anthropology* 6 (1): 26–62.
— (1994b) 'Culture-making: performing Aboriginality at the Asia Society', *American Ethnologist* 21(4): 679–99.
— (1995) 'Re/writing the Primitive: Art Criticism and the Circulation of Aboriginal Painting', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside: A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968)*, ed. I. Lavin, Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study.
O'Hanlon, Michael (1992) 'Unstable Images and Second Skins: Artefact, Exegesis and Assessments in the New Guinea Highlands', *Man* 27 (3): 587–608
Ricœur, Paul (1970) *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
Sutton, Peter (1978) 'Some Observations on Aboriginal Use of Filming at Cape Keerweer, 1977', paper presented at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology seminar, University of Queensland.
— (1992) 'Aboriginal Art, The Nation-State, Suburbia', *Artlink*, 12 (3): 6–9.
— (1988) (ed.) *Dreamings: Art from Aboriginal Australia*, New York: Braziller Publishers.
Taylor, Luke (1987) 'The Same But Different: Social Reproduction and Innovation in the Art of the Kunwinjku of Western Arnhem Land', PhD thesis, Canberra: Australian National University.
von Sturmer, John (1989) 'Aborigines, Representation, Necrophilia', *Art and Text* 32: 127–39.
Williams, Nancy (1976) 'Australian Aboriginal Art at Yirrkala', in *Ethnic and Tourist Arts*, ed. N. Graburn, Berkeley: University of California Press.
Woodburn, James (1982) 'Egalitarian Societies', *Man*, 17 (3): 431–51.
Worth Sol and John Adair (1972) *Through Navajo Eyes*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

10

Displacing the visual: of Trobriand axe-blades and ambiguity in cultural practice

Debbora Battaglia

My purpose in this chapter is to consider how the visual is problematised in cultural practice.[1] Specifically, I examine certain ethnographic situations in which the main subject of discourse is absent – that is, phenomenally invisible – and go on to explore the implications of this absence for a discourse-centred approach to culture. If culture is taken as 'localised in concrete, publicly accessible signs, *the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse*' (Urban's words [1991], emphasis mine), we must, I suggest, look again at situations in which such signs are not the main subject of discourse; situations in which they are rather displacements of a subject located – materially embodied – elsewhere and elsewhen.

The larger question emerging in this light is whether displaced subjects may actually subordinate those discursive sites and actions that a strictly empirical anthropology would judge 'the most important' sites of culture – whether acts of displacement may be more important to compare across cultures than is commonly recognised. This question becomes interesting, becomes consequential for theories of culture, only when displacement has a purpose for actors, that is, when it is an indigenous action of disjoining the material from the realm of sensorial perception – or as in the Trobriand ethnography that engages me here, when something is *made* invisible. When something is made invisible and hence problematised, it does not simply occupy the logical space or place of presupposition or product of discourse. Rather it makes apparent an attempt to assert that space or place – in a word, to control it. Thus the matter is a practical one, arising from the possibility that the practical relevance of 'actually occurring' phenomena may derive from their relation to other practices and objects they call attention to.

It follows that what otherwise might be construed as a purely abstract issue is perhaps better appreciated as an indigenous project of ambiguating relationships: by making an absence felt, by *concretising absence*, a presence, and the present, is asserted as ungraspable. It is this effect of ambiguity, in other words, which people are manipulating, politically and poetically, and which is the alternative subject of the discourse. If a