Convergence at the Crossroads of Modernity: Indigenous Australian New Media Art

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Abstract
In 2004 Stephen Muecke announced that "indigenous modernity is indeed possible" yet "this modernity is quite different from European modernisation processes since it developed its own forms, later including modernist and postmodernist aesthetics" (2004: 5). Pushing Muecke's contention further, it may be argued that Indigenous Australian new media artists are rewriting the Western history of time and modernity for contemporary audiences. The growing number of Indigenous Australian new media art projects counters the digital revolution rhetoric of the 1990s which assumed that new media were going to push aside and absorb old media. Conversely, Indigenous Australian new media artists unsettle the unmarked norms of modernity's historicity (i.e. of what counts as part of its history) through a critical appropriation of "multimodal" discourse (Kress 2010).

Keywords: aborigenal art, Indigenous new media, convergence, multimodality

1. Indigenous modernity and the new

It is the contention of this article that the western reification of technology as colonial property continues to lie at the core of the "possessive investment" in modernity and the 'new', a narrative that remains largely visible in the persistent severing discourses of development of New Media Studies (Lipsitz 2006). Western modernity continues somehow to be the unmarked norm of its historicity (i.e. of what counts as part of its history), which includes or excludes new media art projects according to shared social knowledge of modernity and pre- or post-modernity. Shared social knowledge of modernity provides the life of modern social objects, technologies and institutions, yet also informs our everyday beliefs of when modernity started and ended, and whether we can regard

it as a time-bound concept or a timeless one (Riley 2007: 21-67). The figured world of modernity, based on its implosive, retrospective reification of time has arguably characterised the commoditisation of Aboriginal art and media as old, ancient, and endangered, as they have been framed by the trope of loss. Frames denote expectations about people, objects, events and settings in the world, but as Ervin Goffman put it, individuals also take action, both verbal and physical according to them (1974: 345). Thus, modern frames have relegated Indigenous visual technologies, such as inscriptions and painted barks, to the realm of cultural artefacts from a frozen pre-contact past. Yet anthropologists, ethnologists and art critics have contributed to modernity's framing as an active process of signification, as a structure of anticipation and a strategic move to present a particular position within a certain perspective. Hence, Indigenous Australian new media art has also incurred in modernity's social practice of severing layers of semiotic labour (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001: 86).

In contemporary usage, the Western understanding of the modern is grounded in the industrial and monopolist phase of the capitalist world economy which took place in Europe and the USA principally in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Western modernity has been defined in relation to Europe and North America, and today it refers to industrial and post-industrial societies (King 1997: 110). Hence, the progressive discourse of the coupling of modernity and technological advancement has often contained a non-differential notion of time which continues not to recognise disjunctive temporalities. Homi Bhabha's observation that, "the subject of [worthy] recognition stands in a synchronous space (as befits the Ideal Observer)" still holds in the age of heightened globalisation (1996: 56). Even more so, the globalisation of Western modernity's "sharing of equality is genuinely intended, but only so long as we start from a historically congruent space; the recognition is genuinely felt, but on terms that do not represent the historical genealogies […] that constitute the partial cultures of the minority" (1996: 56). Western definitions of modernity often fail to recognise the historicity of their own designation and modernities which fall outside Western temporal frameworks continue to be represented as belated, as "what is after, stuck in the post" (Williams [1987] 1989: 35).

The debate on modernity and globalisation has often been dichotomised in either celebrative theorisations, which overlook issues of identity and local rights, or deterministic models of globalisation as the imperial imposition of Western modernity. Yet, as Michael Hardt and Toni Negri note (2000), trying to use the nation-state or localisation as a strategy of resistance to globalisation may in the long run be a largely unsatisfactory solution since it fails to grasp global modes of power. On the other hand, critical literature on modernity has often, yet not always, failed to take into consideration the transformative agency and materiality of localities (Pennycook 2007). Thus it may be useful to focus on the translocal and transcultural aspects of modernity and more specifically on the ways in which local modernities influence modernity at large. As Arjun Appadurai has famously argued, "we are functioning in a world fundamentally characterised by objects in motion. These objects include ideas and ideologies, peoples and goods, images and messages, technologies and techniques. This is a world of flows" (1996: 5).

In post-industrial contemporary society, media have perhaps been the most targeted technologies of the discourse of modernity. In line with the progressive model of modernity, new media are expected to supersede previous old media in a teleological line of development. Accordingly, the digital revolution rhetoric of the 1990s depicted new media as a force that was going to push aside and absorb old media. As in the most famous examples of primitivism in modernist art and literature, the effort to inculcate nostalgia is a central feature of the commoditisation of media. Such nostalgia, Arjun Appadurai noted (1996), does not principally involve the evocation of a sentiment to which consumers who really have lost something can respond. Rather, it teaches consumers to miss things they have never lost. In creating experiences of losses that never took place, the advertising of new media art as modern creates what might be called an imagined nostalgia, that is a nostalgia for things that never were. Nostalgia creates the simulacra of periods that constitute the flow of time, conceived as lost, absent, or distant. Thus, it sells a progressive conceptualisation and representation of time and history to contemporary consumers.

As the founder of the online gallery cyberTribe and the Black Out collective, Jenny Fraser, states,

> Works by Aboriginal artists are rarely, if ever, included in mainstream Australian New Media Arts exhibitions or events, and likewise, there are very few Aboriginal curators who include Aboriginal New Media Arts in their exhibitions, so by default there is a huge divergence. This is a curious position because the exclusion or separatism would barely be tolerated in exhibitions that represent a more popular artform, like painting for example. There would be a huge outcry because Aboriginal Art is quite prominent internationally, especially in contrast to Australian Art. It seems that Aboriginal people are expected to assimilate and give up general cultural and social practices, however, artistically the expectation is the reverse – keep those nice ancient artworks coming! (Fraser 2012: 106)

The unstoppable dynamism and innovation of Indigenous Australian new media artists is often met with negative evaluation. Moreover this negative evaluation is not peculiar to a particular technology or to postmodern discourse, indeed it has characterised the modern history of evaluation of modes in the case of writing, broadcast technologies, photography and cinema as well (Langton 1993; Michaels 1994; Russo 2010). Modes as social goods have been used to identify modern identities. As Philip Riley (2007) puts it, social knowledge is distributed differentially, creating epistemic communities, i.e. social figurations or groupings based on shared social knowledge, with their own discursive roles and positions, and these are major determinants of the forms of identity available in the community in question. Hence, discourse has been one of the fundamental conditions for building social knowledge on the distribution of modes in modernity as it assertively re-enacts modernity's desire to fold back on itself. As Geoffrey Batchen notes, cyberspace, its computerised organisation and dissemination of information,

> …is often easily assimilated into military, corporate and consumerist machinations, and has become a metonym for the influential and hegemonic state of the information distribution apparatus. Predictably enough, this simplistic sketch of the relationship between power and technology ends with a paean to the anti-technological innocence of the Australian Aborigine (Batchen 1995: 6).

Nevertheless, in the face of never-ending, counterfactual, announcements of the death of orality, Indigenous songs, music and spoken word performances, together with traditional visual

art, have not disappeared either with the advent of writing, or with the advent of the press, broadcasting media, and new media art. Alongside their ongoing use of traditional media, Indigenous peoples have participated in the growth of Australian literature, in the recordings output of the 20th century, in radio and television broadcasting and in new media art. It is the contention of this article that far from enacting a sweeping revolution of cultural, affective and cognitive processes, "multimodality", "media convergence" and "transmedia storytelling" are traditional in Indigenous Australian cultures as they have always characterised Indigenous Australian media practices, in which the use of a multiplicity of modes was ordinary (Kress 2003, 2010; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Jenkins 2003, 2006).

As I have argued elsewhere (Russo 2009, 2010), Barry Hill's recent biography and collection of T.G.H. Strehlow's 1932-1935 diaries reveals some interesting details on the multimodal nature of Arrernte oral knowledge. During the transcription of more than three-hundred songs by Strehlow and the Arrernte guide, Tom Lyonga, the traditional custodians of the songs lay down a series of bundles, each containing a verse inscribed on a sacred object called *tyuringa*. Strehlow's role was to transcribe the verses while the custodians sang as they unravelled the long strings in which the *tyuringa* were wrapped. Although it is scarcely acknowledged, Strehlow's diaries reveal the difficulties encountered by the anthropologist in understanding and translating the multimodal textuality of the *tyuringa* as he confessed that he, "had to use inversion and certain poetical turns in an attempt to capture some of the dramatic effects of the original" (2002). The multimediality and multimodality of the *tyuringa*, indicated by the multiple meanings of the term which defines the songs, the inscriptions on the sacred objects and the ground-painting which often took place during the performances, was later reified through the widespread nostalgic mode of the anthropological studies of Strehlow's time into a commoditised orality. Strehlow later justified his selling of the secret/sacred images of the Arrernte elders to the German magazine *Stern* by declaring that he owned them for he was the "last of the Aranda" or *ingkata* (ceremonial elders) and was recording "the remnants of a finally doomed culture" (2003). This episode may be regarded as the first example of the Australian investment in the

nostalgic discourse of modernity to frame media and modes, a story that remains largely invisible in the persistent severing discourses of developmental modernisation of histories of the media.

As multimodal studies claim, signifiers are material phenomena and their signifying potential cannot be exhausted by any one system of contrasting features for making and analysing meaning: all semiosis is multimodal (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996; Kress 2010). Hence, multimodal discourse may emerge as an important turning point for Indigenous media studies which try to imagine the future of media and claim that old and new media already have and will interact in ever more complex ways. Yet, in order to do so they will have to dismantle the possessive investment in modernity, which has 'discursively' distinguished linguistic semiotic systems from those of depiction or visual-graphic presentations, and both from others such as the music-sound system or the behavioural-action system. In this sense, Indigenous new media do not spell the end of old media, but call for a reassessment of the discourse of modernity.

2. Multimodal discourse and Indigenous Australian new media art

Recent cultural studies have moved towards a constellated conceptualisation of modernity. This shift entails that modern technology and new media outside the West be placed at the centre of the narrative of modernity. The preeminent role of electronic media in globalisation has contributed to the questioning of the geographical indexing of modernity which has opened its understanding to the acknowledgement of its multiple and entangled histories. Following Arjun Appadurai's groundbreaking study, *Modernity at Large* (1996), cultural and media scholars have not just added events and artists from non-western and minority backgrounds to modernity, but have opened the history of modernity to a cross-cultural understanding which disallows a teleological theory of modernity.

As Rennae Hopkins remarks, in a conversation with Jenny Fraser on the moving image exhibition Big Eye, which showcased stop-motion, 3D and other animation techniques from Australia and Canada in a unique cross-cultural exchange, the screen artists often strategically use digital storytelling techniques to bring social

knowledge and contemporary explorations of time and place to the fore.

> In Big Eye, the Canadian and Australian Aboriginal artists expression is centred on a fusion between traditional and urban – contemporary and ancient. This is where we now find ourselves as indigenous peoples globally. Each generates an almost visual poetry as a narrative connected to the subconscious and the unknown. Two words – "you" and "us" – register a relationship between atmosphere and earth. This is understood as a time continuum between the past, present and future which then returns us back to the start, never-ending. This is what has always made our world view separate and unique to the West which sees the world as linear – a series of events. (Fraser and Hopkins 2012: 110)

The modern logic of linear time, Hopkins notes, is arguably counteracted by the spatial organisation of the visual poetry of the collective new media art project, Big Eye. Interactivity, intertextuality, and hypertextuality, as the principal features of new media (Kress 2003: 5) are respectively at the service of the Indigenous spiritual belief in simultaneity and timelessness (i.e. in the simultaneous existence of the past, the present and the future), the direct interpellation and call and response logic of storytelling, and traditional Indigenous multimodality.

Media convergence and transmedia storytelling (multidimensional flow of content across multiple media platforms and the active appropriation of multiple media industries) have always lain at the heart of traditional media practices. As Jenny Fraser (2012) notes, "Trans Media, Inter-Art or Interdisciplinary Artwork specifically describes a process that engages more than one single art form, either between different art forms or collaborations involving cultural and artistic differences". Yet while storytelling across multiple forms of media is used by most franchising companies to capture their audience, the new media collective projects, Big Eye and Black Out, accentuate and diffuse knowledge of modes and their investment in the colonial discourse of modernity, setting them apart for their metanarrative reflections and creative exploitation of the power of new media.

Social interaction, whether mediated by technology or face-to-face interaction, is the principal modality of knowledge propagation. Multimedia projects such as *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal*

Australia Interactive CD Project, and *Indigenous Australians: An Aboriginal Community Focus,* using template formats which allow Aboriginal communities to add their own information to the CD, enable interactivity and active participation in knowledge as in traditional Aboriginal learning.

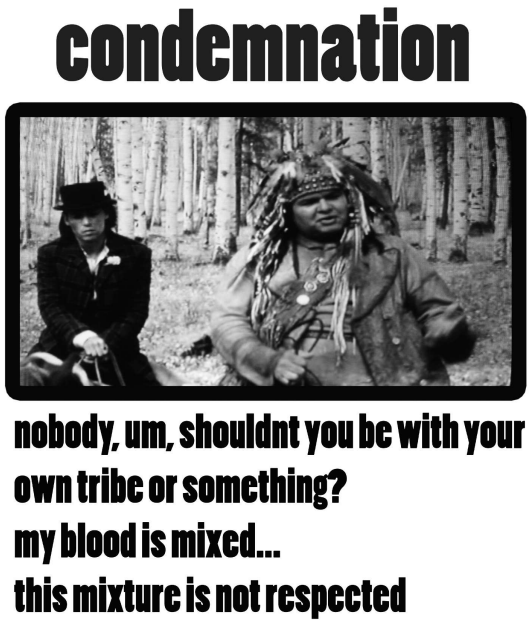
Similarly, Jenny Fraser (2007) in "name that movie", uses digital beta cutting video devices to write back to colonial discourses in mainstream movies.

FIGURE 1
Jenny Fraser, *name that movie storyboard*, courtesy of the artist.

As the storyboard reveals, new media art moves beyond distribution, extending semiotic resources for the production of interactive meanings. Fraser employs new media techniques to re-produce scenes in order to "fill in" and "make the taken-for-granted new and strange" and name the often unsaid and inferable taken-for-

granted knowledge, assumptions and inferences of mainstream movies (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Van Djik 2009; Gee 2011). In the aforementioned multimodal text, images and words expand each other's meaning. The verbal mode supplies text elements, and labels, which by supplying information and knowledge take on and assign specific social roles to digital storytellers and readers/listeners.

FIGURE 2
Jenny Fraser, *name that movie* (detail), courtesy of the artists.



The possibilities of writing back to the ideological functions of media are also evident in several works by Aroha Groves, yet they acquire a central importance in the video art project, *What is a blackfulla woman doing in a virtual dream* (2007), which records the artist's involvement in the role-playing game Second Life during the last year of Howard's government. Videogames and role-playing games, such as Second Life, are utopian spaces that propose highly centralised

and predetermined ideological experiences (Mauco 2009: 113). For instance, racism is often transferred into digital worlds through the encoding of strength and power in players according to skin colour. Arguably, videogames and role-playing games have become a biopolitical device on a large scale. Such technological devices are both the effect and vehicle of the exercise of power/knowledge for the configuration of subjects. Videogames and role-playing games function as a "technology of the self", which, as Foucault suggested, constitutes the modern subject through "real practices" and "operations" upon the body and soul (1988: 18). "Technologies of the self" involve techniques on how to relate to oneself, for example epistemologically (know yourself), despotically (master yourself), or in other ways (care for yourself) (Rose 1996: 135). Yet, the realisations produced by such "technologies of the self" come to be inhabited by individuals who exercise their agency in ways that emphasise the dynamic nature of citing, reiterating and identifying with certain discourses and figured worlds.

In videogames modern ideology is systemic as it produces forms of discourse inculcation: "discourses are dialectically inculcated not only in styles, ways of using language, they are also materialised in bodies, postures, gestures, ways of moving, and so forth" (Fairclough 2005). Notwithstanding, through the engagement with the central omniscient authority of the virtual world, Groves communicates the potential overcoming of the strictures of neo-colonial reality. The link between the cybernetic space and the possibility of a utopian space of indigenous sovereignty, is enacted through the player's figure: the construction of Groves's avatar is a simulation of freedom. As Olivier Mauco notes, a world of video and role-playing games can be compared to the non-place developed in the concept of "supermodernity", in which the loss of legitimacy of political and social institutions and the growing number of repositories and references encourage us to construct our own universe of reference. Supermodernity is the theory of competitive economics of beliefs, with each of us self-interestedly choosing a system of beliefs. "The game is a parallel world, a momentary escape, a parenthesis cut off from the world but simultaneously within it", as Mauco further notes. However, Groves's post-colonial utopia is grounded and rational (Ashcroft 2012) as it deals with the code, mode and media that

structure the player's experience, the game norms, and the ideological representations that legitimise a player's actions. In her creation of a post-colonial utopia, Groves proposes a new way for understanding problems by establishing a system of new values, designed to break with those governing her historical reality. Utopia becomes a goal, a sort of guide for a political project, since Groves "tells the world about" Aboriginal deaths in custody and John Howard's government's 2007 police-military operation in the Northern Territory against remote Aboriginal communities.

Hence, hypertextuality and intertextuality may also be used to quote or allude to modern discourse. Hypertextuality and intertextuality are also central to many works by Destiny Deacon, a descendant of the Kuku and Erub/Mer peoples of Maryborough, whose collection of kitsch "white Australian Aboriginal artefacts", is used to comment on the fetishisation of Aboriginal imagery as the foundation of Australian modernity. For instance, the installation, *Welcome to the Never Never* (1995), consists of a museum glass display cabinet containing ashtrays, souvenir plates, beer holders, statuettes and mantelpieces, which represent "Aboriginal culture as imagined by those outside it" (Reihana 2004: 51). Tea-towels, ashtrays and other paraphernalia produced in the 1930s with depictions of Indigenous women and children are appropriated by Deacon in digital art works such as *Teatowel – Dancing Dollys* (1993-1995), in which she transfers two dancing black dolls in Aboriginal flag garments on to linen using a lazer. Other representative works are the *Blak lik me* triptych (1991-1995), in which she juxtaposes the close-ups of one Indigenous woman with the image of another Indigenous woman depicted on a decorative plate mounted on a lounge mantlepiece, and *Adoption* (1993-2000), an image of little dark baby dolls in paper cupcake cups, in which she relates the practice of some non-Indigenous couples "shopping" or "snacking" at orphanages for coloured children.

The repetition of commodity, the mechanical repetition of the same (the *idem* of commodified identity), unsettles its own discourse through the force of affective intensification (Martin and White 2004). Deacon exposes the modern constitution of "Aboriginality" through commodification. The stereotyped "Aboriginal" identity of Australian commodity culture is evoked and erased at the same time. The invitation to encounter the missing subject questions the

"West's obsession that our primary relation to objects and ourselves is analogous to visual perception" (Bhabha 1990: 202). Dolls perform a spatialisation of the subject, they stage other ways of being, which re-present and re-assemble the debris of modernity in order to haunt the colonial gaze. The question of identity is shifted from the common routes of national self-recognition to the very heart of the domestic space whose ordinariness reveals the often-forgotten history of Australian indigenous domestic servants as the economic backbone of Australia's modernity. The materials and commodities of domestic spaces in Deacon's visual works become materials for staging the silenced and unspoken through a process of citation. In place of the symbolic consciousness that gives the image of "Aboriginal" identity its unity and integrity, the viewer is confronted with the material traces of modernity (Butler 1993: 226).

Hence, new media, which have been invented for the purpose of interactive transmission, convergence and multimodality have acquired a semiotic potential of their own and have opened up the history of technology to new choices and discourses. Australia's spectral narration of modernity has created as its *constitutive outside* a space of material and political effectivity for specific quotations of invisible discourses, the voice of doxa and common sense about modernity (Hermans 2004), which suggest the fictionality of internal homogeneity. Modernity becomes a constructed form of closure which stages the silenced and unspoken other that it "lacks" through its own "invisible guests", debris and trash (Watkins 1986). Thinking of old and new media in terms of cross-cultural history means that their analysis has to consider how they co-exist, opening up the Western progressive history of media, modes and technology to the performative, disjunctive elements that have historically been left out. Conjoining a future that is already here with a past that continually returns, the Indigenous spectral matter of new media is perhaps something that can be conjured up only through the account of its own discursive trajectories in space and time.

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