

## Bad Aboriginal Art Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons

by Eric Michaels; Allen & Unwin, 1994; 181 pp; \$29.95 softcover.

*Bad Aboriginal Art* is a collection of essays written between 1986 and 1988 and finally published in 1994 — six years after the author's death. These essays are a partial account of Michaels' three years researching the impact of television on the remote Warlpiri community at Yuendumu on the edge of the Tanami Desert in central Australia. The community was founded as a Baptist mission in 1943 and has been self-governing since 1978. It has a population of 500 to 1000 people depending on the season. Michaels is particularly concerned with issues raised by Warlpiri uses of technology, specifically television and video, and the production and marketing of Warlpiri artworks. His discussions of these issues draw on an eclectic range of interests including anthropology, art criticism, cultural studies, ethnographic film making, and audience and reception studies.

Reading Eric Michaels' *Bad Aboriginal Art* makes me think of two separate, but related, incidents that occurred in 1991 and 1992. The first involved a visit to a northwest community at which we arrived just days after the death of an elder. Community members spent the week in mourning before the burial, which involved both traditional and Christian customs. We spent the appointed day in the community hall aware that our very presence was an intrusion. About 3 p.m. a line of men and boys, all wearing formal suits, paraded from the elder's house up the hill to the community cemetery. As we sat in the hall we saw part of this procession. It struck me as surreal; yet it had a specific history. One woman with us picked up a camera and began to walk outside.

The second incident was a visit to Roebourne in October 1992. On this occasion we were driving through the town looking at newly erected fences. They were approximately two feet high, extended across the width of each house, and were freshly painted in apple green. The fences were truly something to look at. They were the picket fences from many a 'feel-good' sitcom. They

demarcated the public space of the verge from the private space of homes. These fences had been recently erected by a local mining company as their contribution to the community. In front of most fences were piles of uncollected rubbish, behind them were tables and chairs brought out from the houses so that people could sit in the cool afternoon and evening air. In most yards people could be seen sitting and drinking, having obviously very little else to do.

At various times when I have spoken to people about these incidents, I have been asked for photographs. This is, of course, not an unusual request. Taking photographs of places we visit is most often taken for granted. A photograph of the picket fences without any context would, however, have been meaningless. And a photograph of the fences framed by Aboriginal people drinking and piles of rubbish would presumably elicit a number of responses, few of them focusing on the contributions of mining companies to Aboriginal communities. Likewise, photographs of a procession of Aboriginal people, all in formal suits, is most likely to act as a catalyst for stories about the exotic other rather than accounts of colonial history or even cultural adaptation.

In *Bad Aboriginal Art* Michaels discusses some of the ways non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal peoples contribute to contemporary notions of 'primitivism' and 'exoticism'. Further, from what he says, the taking of photographs in each of the above cases would be an appropriation of Aboriginal images, a violation of privacy and would thus constitute a moral offence. Just what constitutes a 'moral offence' is central to this work. He also challenges the photographer/tourist/reader to think seriously about acts of representation and the power of representation to construct people in particular ways. The first essay in the collection — 'A Primer of Restrictions on Picture-Taking in Traditional Areas of Aboriginal Australia' — provides a discussion of appropriation, respect for

privacy, the secret/sacred domain, the truth of photos, and a co-operative, collaborative approach to production.

Michaels foregrounds the relationships that exist between Aborigines and all other Australians. He insists that these relationships must be constantly negotiated and re-negotiated and that negotiations must be 'based on cultural rather than material calculations'. Here he is speaking specifically about Aboriginal art practices as opposed to 'fine art', that is, about 'problems of production, circulation and exchange'. Yet what he says is immediately relevant in many situations — examples such as Native Title negotiations and understandings of social justice immediately come to mind. Aboriginal concepts of guardianship and exchange, mobility and place, are counterposed with principles of property ownership as enshrined in English law, to raise questions about topics such as the efficacy of Aboriginal land claims strategies in Australian courts.

Dick Hebdige provides a useful and comprehensive foreword to the work, in which he outlines some of Michaels' academic and personal history. He also makes the point that much of the power of Michaels' work is his ability to 'establish the parameters within which text, author, reader(s), and Warlpiri "respondents" engage and interact'. Certainly, the need for negotiation between peoples of equal standing is central to Michaels' agenda so that he deconstructs the centre/periphery, primitive/developed, and pre- and post-literate oppositions that are, so often, a part of everyday currency providing a comprehensive critical agenda for crosscultural communications. Michaels challenges the validity of these binaries by discussing Warlpiri use of technology and engagement in the global market as a contemporary concern. He does not merely denounce a belief in or use of such hierarchies as being 'left-over' from a colonial past as does some analysis of Aboriginal culture and some naive post-colonial theory.

In her introduction, Marcia Langton situates Michaels's work 'in the middle of a local revolution' that empowers Aboriginal people to represent them-

selves. She explains that self-representation is central to self-determination and cultural maintenance. Further, it is the politics of self-representation that Michaels foregrounds in his essays (see specifically 'For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuen-dumu').

*Bad Aboriginal Art* is a valuable contribution to anyone interested in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships.

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## Women, Male Violence and the Law

**edited by Julie Stubbs; Institute of Criminology; 1994; distributed by Federation Press; 262 pp; \$29.95.**

This book is a collection of essays by various lawyers, social scientists, educators and policy-makers. The essays examine the responses of international, Australian and New Zealand law to violence against women. The book does not aim to set out the existing law about male violence. Rather, it seeks to examine various topical legal issues about domestic violence. The contributions deal with a broad range of issues from the reluctance of international law to regulate or prohibit violence in the home, to judicial constructions of the family which trivialise violence, to governmental failure to fund culturally appropriate legal services for Aboriginal women.

The reader is advised in the Introduction that the aim of the book is to explore both the transformative possibilities and the limitations of the law in the context of domestic violence. The reader is asked to contemplate whether the law is a limited and insufficient tool with which to achieve justice for women. On one level therefore, the success or failure of the book can be measured by the extent to which it provides an answer to this question. However, both the Introduction and the book as a whole are inconclusive about the transformative possibilities of law. Stubbs is wary of placing too much faith in law reform, pointing out that the outcomes of legislative and policy changes are neither straightforward nor predictable. However, the Introduction does suggest that, given the privileged status of the law, feminists cannot afford not to engage with our legal institutions. To dismiss the law as irrevocably gendered is to permit legal and social power to be constructed and distributed in a way that continues to disadvantage women.

The Introduction advises that the book constitutes a necessarily partial account which does not canvass violence in lesbian and gay relationships, the effects of violence on children, the

experiences of NESB women and violence in the context of immigration. The editor is aware of the dangers of universalising the experiences of women at the cost of the different lives of women outside the dominant culture. It is pointed out that the reforms over recent decades which provide a measure of legal protection against violence in the home are only readily available to members of dominant social groups. Accordingly, white, financially privileged, well-educated women in large urban areas are able to mobilise the law. In contrast, Aboriginal women, rural women, NESB women and other women outside the dominant cultural groups are the least protected by these reforms.

The chapter by Charlesworth and Chinkin examines international law and why it has been so reluctant to respond to the worldwide problem of violence against women. They suggest that the reason for this reluctance lies in the public/private dichotomy whereby international law has traditionally refused to regulate a state's private or domestic affairs. This consequence of the public/private dichotomy is ironic given that this very same dichotomy allows states themselves to ignore violence in the home.

Charlesworth and Chinkin report that the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women is a significant step forward in the context of the traditional reluctance of international law to regulate behaviour in the 'private sphere'. Although the 1993 declaration is an important development, it fails to state that violence against women is a violation of human rights. Charlesworth and Chinkin see the declaration as a good basis for further developments to protect women. They highlight the danger of compartmentalising women's rights, relegating it to an under-resourced sphere of international law. This would

allow mainstream human rights bodies to ignore the specific concerns of women. They argue that international law must make states accountable for sustaining a legal environment where violence against women is acceptable. This may require a radical rethinking of the sources and processes of international law.

In their chapter Busch and Robertson describe the Hamilton Abuse Intervention Pilot Project which was established in New Zealand in 1991. The programme sought to intervene in the criminal justice system where there was a report to police of domestic violence. It aimed to ensure women's safety and the prosecution and rehabilitation of abusers. Protocols were developed to minimise the discretion available to individual decision-makers. For example, the police did not have a discretion to grant bail or not to charge offenders. The programme aimed to develop a co-operative approach, with consistency and information sharing between different agencies such as police, courts, refugees and corrections personnel. This process of information sharing and networking fostered a consistent, systemic approach to violence. Unfortunately, this chapter was mainly descriptive. It would be valuable to read an in-depth evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme.

Pam Greer writes of the various programmes in New South Wales where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have been consulted about the problem of domestic violence in their communities. She writes that, despite over a decade of such consultations, there is still a desperate unmet need for culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal women. Greer reports that Aboriginal women are over-represented in the statistics of women killed by their partners. She criticises government agencies such as the DSS, housing agencies and community services departments for failing to meet the specific needs of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal women. She sees a desperate need for an Aboriginal Women's Legal Service. Her chapter is a condemnation of the failure to establish and fund culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Nan Seuffert describes a research project where she sought to employ specifically feminist methods of research to integrate women's experiences into the theory and practice of being a lawyer.