

Migrating Images

producing ... reading ... transporting ... translating



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Aboriginality

Gesture, Encounter and Visual Culture

In 1802 a young Frenchman jumped out of a boat onto the shore of Maria Island off the coast of Tasmania, close to Australia. Wearing long hair, with a golden earring and a Directoire-style waistcoat, François Péron cut quite a dash, spotted from the ship. Péron marched up to a group of Tyreddeme people, whom the West now call Aboriginals. He made gestures taken from French deaf sign language, that he understood to be the original human language of action. As he expected, they responded. On that beach Aboriginality was enacted by both sides. The performance was also an origin, if not a cause, of visual culture as a part of art history, at once its beginning and its end. An archive emerges from among the many other archives that the print archive cannot fully contain: the pattern and sense of gesture, the affect of the body, the spectres of vision. As we survey the ruins of the university, it may be appropriate to recall our long history of Aboriginality. This scene might be taken as the primal scene of the migrant image, or even the transported image, given that Britain was at that time transporting convicts to Australia. In using what he believed to be a new universal language, Péron was prefiguring our own obsession with digital technology as a solvent of cultural difference. It is also important to remember that in the South Pacific, first encounters of this kind remain contemporary in all senses, being both culturally and politically contested.

The meeting of European voyagers and indigenous peoples that produced Aboriginality might be defined in the terms Derrida uses to describe hauntology, the philosophy of spectres: 'Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself: a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*.' South Pacific encounters were a repetition of the Atlantic encounters of the Early Modern Period for the Europeans and of the legendary encounters of religion and history for the Polynesians. They were also the

first such encounters. But that singularity at once ended the lack of contact between the two peoples, making it a last time as well. This hauntological time replaces the traditional 'zero point' of encounter in which 'Time Before was the time of pure Aboriginality. Time After was a time of cultural bastardy and changed identity.' In the encounter with the radically other, a performative ghost was generated that is nonetheless itself haunted by the spectre of pure Aboriginality.⁵

What was at stake was the performance of Western representation and observation, flickering between closet philosophy, natural history and the disrupting spectre of Aboriginality. South Pacific encounters generated an intense debate between explorers and philosophers over the status of observation. Voyagers dismissed the Enlightenment as a period of 'closet philosophers who spend their lives forging vain systems, and all of whose efforts end up building nothing but card castles'. Thinkers like Diderot returned the compliment by describing the explorers' ships as nothing more than 'floating houses', in which the navigator's immobility effectively paralleled that of the philosopher in his living room, while condemning the innocent Tahitians to slavery. Both sides claimed a clarity of vision that the other inevitably lacked, complicating any singular theory of observation in the period. This doubling has been evoked by Nicholas Thomas who has argued that we need to think of a 'double vision' in the Pacific, suggesting both that the indigenous point of view needs to be included, and that in so doing, the result is a blurring of the crisp vision so prized by the Enlightened.⁵ The inclusion of Aboriginality complicates Western fantasies of the origin, whether of language, vision or culture. In a celebrated 1993 essay, the critic and actor Marcia Langton noted that there were some sixty-seven competing definitions of Aboriginality. Refusing to adopt the standard Australian legal definition—that persons are Aboriginal if they are descended from an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identify as Aboriginal, and are recognized as Aboriginal by members of their community—Langton instead insisted that the very concept of Aboriginality is a result of cross-cultural encounter. There is Aboriginality only in relation to a non-native immigrant, just as one is deaf only in relation to a person with hearing. She asserts, then, that 'Aboriginality' arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience ... Moreover, the creation of 'Aboriginality' is not a fixed thing. It is created from our histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of Black and White in dialogue.⁶

Aboriginality does not, then, refer just to those people now known to the West as Aboriginals. It is an ethical relationship between people that exists in hauntological time, the repetition of the first time that is also a last time.

Why did Péron use deaf sign language with the Aboriginals on Maria Island? Following the Enlightenment conviction that gesture was the first universal language, the French Revolution created an Institute for the Deaf based on sign language instruction in 1791. Its purpose was both to render the deaf useful, regenerated citizens of the republic and to develop sign language as a universal language to communicate with subaltern citizens of all kinds. At the high point of revolutionary radicalism in 1794, some members of the Convention questioned whether the deaf needed such an Institute, arguing that they coped very well already. Here, sign language represented the Aboriginal freedom of the state of nature, requiring no enhancement. In defense of their new organization, the Institute argued instead for the primitivism of the Aboriginal: 'the deaf-mute is a savage, always close to ferocity and always on the point of becoming a monster.' Combined with the pleas of the deaf themselves under questioning from the Convention, this argument won the day. The strategy of representing the deaf as Aboriginals was adopted by their own representatives. In a performance during which signed answers were given to questions posed by hearing spectators, the deaf intellectual Jean Massieu responded to the question: 'What difference is there between natural and artificial Language?' Massieu gave the model answer of the late Enlightenment: '*Natural language* is the language which the deaf and dumb, savages, and those who know no language, make use of to communicate to one another their ideas and feelings. It is the language of nature, the natural representation of objects.' It was Massieu who had taught Péron sign language at the behest of the Society for the Observation of Man as a preparation for the voyage captained by Nicolas Baudin to the South Pacific. This instruction was made on the mutual understanding that, as deaf sign language was the original language of action, the indigenous people would undoubtedly understand it. The French Revolution created an evolutionary hierarchy of language, locating natural representation as primitivism. But for the revolutionaries, the question of representation was also the question of liberty. What could not quite be determined was where liberty should be located in this oscillation of signs. It is a literally aboriginal question—*ab origine* means from the origin. In this unstable encounter, sign language became a technology for the production of the origin, whether as primitive or as universal, a

visible mediator between the Western observer and his (gender intended) primitive object.

On Maria Island a mutual observation took place between French and Tyreddeme, producing Aboriginality, as Péron later described it: 'Both parties took stock of one another for a little time. We were so novel to one another!' Although it was not their first encounter with Europeans,⁸ the Tyreddeme were surprised by the appearance of the French and suspected they were women: 'They showed an extreme desire to examine our genital organs.' After the French demurred, 'they insisted on it only in the case of Citizen Michel,' due to his 'slight build and lack of beard ... But Citizen Michel suddenly demonstrated such striking proof of his virility that they all uttered loud cries of surprise mingled with loud roars of laughter.'⁹ This performance of sexual desire for the other created a visual field in which the two groups could now perceive each other clearly. The artist Nicolas-Martin Petit then 'performed for them some sleight-of-hand and conjuring tricks.'¹⁰ As each of Baudin's ships carried a magic lantern,¹¹ this might have been the beginning of art history in Australia. Petit, who is believed to have trained in the Neo-Classical studio of David, where he would have been taught to imitate the sign language of the deaf, then sketched the portrait of a man named Bara-Orou, who was felt to be the 'handsomest' of the group (fig. 1). In its worked-up form, this watercolour with gouache and ink shows a powerfully built young man, with extensive decorative scarring and ochre-coloured hair. His coiffure reminded one of the group of 'the red oiled wigs that the French ladies wore a few years ago.'¹² Aboriginality was constructed through such metonymy, which links the two cultures via the colonial uncanny. After this drawing was made, one of the Tyreddeme made this connection direct. He used Petit's crayon to colour himself red, while the others decided to decorate Péron's face using charcoal.¹³ In Tyreddeme culture, ochre was highly-prized as a colour for body and hair that was not found on local lands. In exchange they marked Péron with the black colour that



Fig. 1. Nicolas-Martin Petit: *Bara-Orou*, watercolour with gouache and ink.

they used around the eyes and elsewhere. Péron profited from the occasion 'to make known to them our feelings of friendship, helped out a great deal by the language of action', by which he meant gestural sign language, 'the import of which they grasped with a shrewdness difficult to conceive in our society'. This seemed to be proving that gesture was indeed the language of Aboriginality. The gesture here is the name for a performance motivated by the desire that representation should be equivalent to its object. At the same time, it was subject to a performative interpretation 'that transforms the very object it interprets'. Such interpretation might turn theatrical gesture into natural sign, a gesture of welcome into a threat, or a person into an Aboriginal.

From the French point of view, it was so far so good—one of the first pieces of anthropological field-work was proceeding according to the plan devised by the Society. In nine sub-heads, the paper drawn up by the Society's secretary Jauffret emphasized that 'difference' and the 'place in the living scale of things' was the key to their point of view.¹⁴ Observation in the field was enabled as a series of differences and similarities that created links between the two radically different cultures. Inevitably, performative misunderstanding soon ensued and the French retreated, threatening the Tyreddeme with their muskets. Yet it was the indigenous group who had controlled the encounter, accustomed as they were to meeting with strangers both European and Aboriginal. A complex set of performative practices, known as *corroborree*, governed such encounters that might lead to marriages between the two groups—hence their interest in Martin's gender. While Europeans are often represented in contemporary Aboriginal art as ghosts, the alleged first response of the Eora to Captain Cook was a more pragmatic one: 'Go away.' Sadly for the Aboriginals, the Europeans stayed.

The history of such gestural encounters, part of what Foucault has called 'subjugated knowledges', cannot be tracked in linear fashion. They re-emerge like the spectre at unexpected but nonetheless appropriate moments. In 1860, Australia was preparing for its transition from a penal colony to a federation of the emancipated by creating a series of institutions and knowledges that would sustain the indigenous and other minorities in a state of what British law termed 'civil disability', the antonym of emancipation. Australia put into practice the mechanisms of 'biopower', which we can understand as the domain of life over which power has taken control. Far from being an exception, this deployment was paradigmatic of the experience of Western modernity. In that same year, 1860, a deaf carpenter

named Frederick Rose established a school for the deaf in Melbourne; the Board for the Protection of Aborigines created a series of Missions for so-called 'Full Blood' aborigines to exclude them from civil society; and anthropologists 'discovered' Aboriginal signed languages. Yet the Aboriginal gesture became a part of Western knowledge systems that construct its others as being the same. And in so doing we will find ourselves at the origin of visual culture within art history.

Like its European cousins, the Victorian Institute staged performances of sign language and mime that sold out the largest hall in town. This show was taken on tour by the philanthropical clerics that had come to run the Institute. In March 1871, the deaf performers reached East Gippsland. As ever, it was stressed to the local white hearing population that the deaf 'grew up a perfect heathen'¹⁵ and the uneducated deaf were equivalent to 'the brutes that perish'. The parallel with the Aboriginal population was clear. Unlike the indigenous who clung to their heathenism, education had rendered the deaf worthy of redemption, as evidenced by their mimed performance of scenes from the New Testament. Intriguingly, Rose took his deaf group the next day to the Ramahyuck Aboriginal mission station, created by Friedrich Hagenauer, a Moravian missionary whose religious fervour was matched only by his detestation of indigenous culture. He established a model disciplinary institution devoted to the cultivation of arrowroot, with daily life controlled by a central clock. The local Gunnai who had been confined to the camp, built little Victorian cottages with flock wallpaper and chimneys. One Gunnai, known only as Bullock Jack, responded by becoming an artist and an installation artist at that. He created a traditional bark hut that he filled with bark figures, three to four feet high, modelled on those used during initiation ceremonies, which he called his family. His other piece at the station was a series of poles across the station that he said were an indigenous form of telegraph, perhaps also echoing carvings used in funeral practice. When taken to church, Bullock Jack, observing what seemed to him an excess of zeal, would run out crying 'Too much love of God!' His art can be interpreted as an attempt to mediate his sense of embodied and literally grounded self with the destructive love of God that had descended on him by means of hybrid representation.

It was in this space that the deaf children reprised their performance of signing for the Gunnai, including an imitation of photography. As Rose told the story: 'This caused so much merriment to the dusky natives that they literally screamed with laughter and could not repress themselves from jumping into the air.' This is

an intensely ambivalent moment. The performance enacted at one level the Enlightenment presumption of subaltern equivalence in which deaf children and Gunnai alike were subsumed under the rhetoric of Aboriginality. At the same time, the Rabelaisian laughter of the Gunnai could be seen as a carnival of subjugated knowledge, a counterpoint to the amusement of the Gippsland hearing at the deaf performance. The Gunnai had a flash of recognition, seeing the deaf students as also attempting to mediate the apparent illogicality of colonial culture. A donation of £5/15/8 later arrived at the Institution from the mission, being the proceeds of the sale of possum skins hunted by the boys.¹⁶ The donation indicates that the recognition generated by the performance led to a shared hunting expedition and exchange of skills. There was, then, a performative exchange between the ghosts of emancipation, the objects of discipline that produced laughter, collective experience, and finally, exchange value.

How was this communication effected? Anthropological field work has noted in passing the existence of a deaf sign language among Aboriginal peoples that was also used between people who did not understand each other's languages, by young men after certain initiations and by women in mourning. These traces suggest that there is a tradition of deaf sign language among Aboriginal peoples as one would expect, given the higher incidence of deafness in cultures without access to antibiotics and vaccines. Some of these signs were likely to have been incorporated into the 'home sign' (a localized sign language arising among a specific deaf community without pedagogical reinforcement) used by European deaf in Australia. Aborigines and deaf people would have met not only in everyday life but in the disciplinary institutions like hospitals and asylums to which both were consigned. In short, there may have been a flash of pattern recognition that was not wishful thinking but actual communication.

The normative possibilities of this mode of exchange were quickly recognized by the anthropological profession. In 1873 Captain Garrick Mallery, well-known for his transcription of the signs used by Plains Indians, staged a meeting between American Indian signers and deaf signers at the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. He was impressed by the deaf signs: 'What to the Indian is a mere adjunct or accomplishment is to the deaf-mute the natural mode of utterance.'¹⁷ Mallery ignored or did not know that Native American sign was one of the constituent parts of American Sign Language, as Laurent Clerc pointed out to the Connecticut legislature in 1818.¹⁸ This reinscription of the origin was to be a

repeating trope of modern considerations of gestural encounter. Whereas (European) deaf sign had been used as a means of communicating with non-Western others, it was now reinscribed as part of an infinite non-Western series of difference that cumulatively insist on one essential difference.

It was at this time that European anthropology claimed to discover that Aboriginals used sign. On an expedition to Central Australia in 1860, the explorer and anthropologist John McDouall Stuart met three Aboriginal men. He tried by signs to locate water but was unsuccessful: "... one was an old man. After some time, and having conferred with his two sons, he turned round, and surprised me by giving me one of the Masonic signs. I looked at him steadily; he repeated it, and so did his sons. I then returned it, which seemed to please them much."¹⁹ Here the sign flickered in and out of sight until a perfect misrecognition occurred. Unable to make intelligible signs for water, Stuart nonetheless succeeded in representing the idea of communication to the men he met. They conferred and decided on a sign to use that might make sense to Stuart, perhaps in the sense of appeasing a spirit or ghost. Stuart chose to recognize this sign as a Masonic sign, connecting the indigenous people with the secret society of Western Europe. The repetition of the sign convinced not just Stuart but generations of Australian anthropologists that Masonic signs were in use among Aboriginal peoples. National surveys in 1886 and 1904 sought to establish the extent of its use and in a book distributed at the influential Columbian Exposition of 1892 in Chicago, John Fraser claimed that 'blacks in the wild state, and in places far removed from contact with white civilization, have been known to make use of Masonic signs when approached by white men'.²⁰ His conclusion was that the Aboriginals, far from being simply indigenous to Australia, were in fact originally from Babylon.²¹ As unusual as this attribution now sounds, it was something of a cliché in the nineteenth century, subscribed to by such luminaries as Baudelaire. Gestural sign was the ghost of pure communication before the destruction of the Tower of Babel. The gestures that had been observed by Europeans since first contact were now recast as a bizarre parallel between White and Black Australia, across the colonial colour line.

The vertigo that results from this mirrored archive of representation and observation, which Derrida has called 'archive fever', has generated a revival of art historical disciplinarity, reinforced by a return to the historiographic classics. To approach the topic outlined here, in this view, one might turn to Aby Warburg, the presumed father of visual culture, and art history alike, and his theory of gesture.

Yet this turn leads back to the very Aboriginality outlined here. Warburg had read Charles Darwin's 1872 treatise on expression as a student in 1888. Darwin was influenced by Edward Burnet Taylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865) that found evidence for an orinary gesture language in the Aboriginality of the deaf: 'The best evidence of the unity of the gesture language is the ease and certainty with which any savage from any country can understand and be understood in a deaf and dumb school.'²² When Darwin published his work on expression, he formalized this empirical evidence into a principle of antithesis: 'With conventional signs that are not innate such as those used by the deaf and dumb and by savages, the principle of opposition or antithesis has been particularly brought into play.'²³ When Warburg adopted this idea, he used it to sustain his theory of the 'antithetical expression' in art.²⁴ In 1905, he described this process as 'something that Italians had long sought—and therefore found—in the art of the ancient world: extremes of gestural and physiognomic expression, stylized in tragic sublimity'.²⁵ From this origin, one might trace a history of gestural encounter as the sublime. But wait. Darwin's theory of gesture was drawn from the experience of anthropologists and missionaries in the British Empire, including some working in Australia. Their theories of Aboriginal sign were part of Darwin's raw material and were insensibly incorporated into this 'origin' of art history. One respondent was in fact Hagenauer of Ramahyuck, where the deaf had performed for the Gunnai.²⁶ No wonder Warburg called his project 'a magical history to tell. Ghost stories for grown-ups'.²⁷ Since its origin in the Enlightenment, art history has always been confronted by the phantom of visual culture through which it constitutes itself as an impartial observational practice. If we relocate our viewing to the place of the revenant, refusing the chimera of impartiality, there is only spectral Aboriginality. For as Walter Benjamin once observed: 'Each gesture is an event—one might even say a drama—in itself.'²⁸ Aboriginality, the product of Babylonians in exile, is a response to a crisis that will not simply go away but endures. It is, then, epic Benjamin's sense: pre-historic yet utterly contemporary, haunted by past and future catastrophe and uncertain as to the status of the contemporary. As such, it has something to commend it as the mentality for this moment at once apocalyptic and banal.

Notes

- 1 This paper is a shortened version of a longer essay on this theme, forthcoming.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 19.
- 3 Greg Denning, 'The Comaroffs Out of Africa', *American Historical Review*, 108 (2) (April 2003), 475.
- 4 Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'Ghostwriting: Working Out Visual Culture', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1 (2) (2002), 239–54.
- 5 Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche, eds., *Double Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also the classic by Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).
- 6 Marcia Langton, 'Well, I heard it on the radio and saw it on the television.' *An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things* (Woolloomooloo, NSW: 1993), 31. See also Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 7 Mirzoeff, *Silent Poetry. Deafness, Sign and Visual Culture in Modern France* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 62.
- 8 Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania: Van Diemen's Land from the Earliest Times to 1855* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983), 28–29.
- 9 N.J.B. Plomley, *The Baudin Expedition and the Tasmanian Aborigines 1802* (Hobart: Blubber Head Press, 1983), 84.
- 10 Ibid., 63.
- 11 As well as 275 mirrors; *Journal*, 591.
- 12 Catalogue entry no. 13, *Terre Napoleon Through French Eyes*, 70.
- 13 Plomley, *The Baudin Expedition*, *ibid.*, 86.
- 14 L.F. Jauffret, 'Considerations to serve in the choice of objects that may assist in the formation of the Special Museum of the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme, requested of the Society by Captain Baudin', appendix VIII, Baudin, *Journals*, 594–96.
- 15 The correspondent concluded that the 'difficulty of bringing the deaf mute under mental discipline; or indeed under any discipline, is beyond belief'. After a further lecture on deaf education, a demonstration of oral education by means of touch was given. The deaf children were made to take off their shoes and socks and 'enjoy' the sound of a musical box through their feet. The children then answered Scriptural questions posed by means of cards.
- 16 Burchett, *Utmost for the Highest* (Melbourne: Hall's Bookstore 1964), 115.
- 17 Quoted by D. Jean Umiker-Seboek and Thomas A. Seboek, *Aboriginal Sign Languages of the Americas and Australia*, vol. 2, 'The Americas and Australia' (London and New York: Plenum Press, 1978), xxiii.
- 18 *Address Written by Mr Clerc and read by his request at a public examination of the pupils of the Connecticut Asylum before the Governor and both Houses of the Legislature, 8 May 1818* (Hartford: Hudson, 1818).
- 19 Adam Kendon, *Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia: Culture, Semiotic and Communicative Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 18.
- 20 Kendon *ibid.*, 19.
- 21 John Fraser, *An Australian Language as Spoken by the Awabakal* (Sydney, 1892); see also A.W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, [1904] 1906), 7.
- 22 Edward Burnet Taylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilisation* (London: John Murray, 1865), 53–54.
- 23 Charles Darwin, *Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: 1872), 62. See Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Gestes mémoratifs, déplacés, réversifs: Warburg avec Darwin', in his *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps de fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions de minuit, 2002), 224–248.
- 24 Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, introduction by Kurt W. Forster, trans. David Brit (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 36–38.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 'Dürer and Italian Antiquity', 558.
- 26 Friedrich A. Hagenauer, 'Letterbook for 1867', n.p., MS 3343 vol.1, National Library of Australia.
- 27 Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, *ibid.*
- 28 Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, eds., trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., *Selected Writings*. Volume 2: 1927.