autonomy and antipodality in global village

McKENZIE WARK

We are no-one. Just whites, marooned in the East by history.

David Ireland,
The Unknown Industrial Prisoner

To the Vector the Spoils *January 26th, 1988: It was a strange experience, watching those sailing ships, simultaneously entering Sydney Harbour and entering my l iving room — and many thousands of others via the live TV broadcast. It was a re-enactment of the white invasion of the Australian continent, performed 200 years later for the cameras. As with the first arrival of the first fleet, on this second coming the invaders parked their boats and thanked their sponsors. This time they didn't fly the Union Jack and thank God and the monarchy. This time the sponsor was, of course, Coca-cola.*

How to think about new media in the context of contemporary Australian culture — now that's a tough one. For a long time Australian culture has manifested a desperate attempt to fix a few things in consciousness between two great *abstract terrains of movement*. The first is the sea. The cultures that invaded Australia did so using a naval technology that turned the space of nautical dangers into an abstract space of movement, migration, trade and above all, of strategy. This was a history of the transformation of the space of the oceans into a universal space of movement. The project of transforming the antipodes through invasion and settlement presupposes a world of material flows. The 'conquest' of nature and the creation of the

seco*nd nature* of built environments we mostly inhabit, presupposes this abstract space of flows.

The second abstract space is that of the media *vector*. Australia is an inter-zone, a node of exchange in the global media flows that constitute post-modernity. This is so at the level of culture: Australia as an avid consumer and producer of media product, particularly music and television. It is true also at the level of strategy. During the Gulf War, when Iraqi commanders order a SCUD missile launch via radio-telephone from Baghdad, orbiting US satellites intercepted the signal. Another satellite may have detected the launch using infra-red sensors. The American military installation at Nurrungar in South Australia down-linked information from both satellites. From there a satellite relayed it to the Pentagon, which routes it to the US command HQ in Saudi Arabia and to Patriot missile bases in Saudi Arabia and Israel.[1] The Australian government has no control over these strategic flows that pass through its territory. It need not even be informed.

The passage from modernity to postmodernity seems to me to involve the passage from one form of abstraction to another — from the second nature of abstract social spaces created by sea and rail transport to the abstract *information landscapes* created by the telegraph, telephone, television and telecommunications. The present phase of development (of digital media) seems to belong to quite a longstanding development in the lines of relationality, which are fundamentally relations of *power*, which organise the globe.[2] This is the neglected dimension of modernity. Viewed from the antipodes, the fundamental thing about modernity is the creation of the globe as an abstract space of movement and strategy. It is not what happened in Europe that is fundamental to modernity, it is Europe's relation to its many antipodes.[3] It is not what is happening in the United States that is fundamental to postmodernity, but what is happening in its relations to its antipodes.[4]

From the antipodes, one can contrast Foucault's notion of the development of regimes of disciplinary technologies (as the most fundamental transformation) with a genealogy of what one might call *vectoral technologies*. It is not the Panopticon but the British Navy that in this latter view emerges as a key technological regime of power in the early modern period. Let's not forget that Bentham's famous pamphlet was called *The Panopticon or New South Wales.* Panoptic power is an enclosure, classification and disciplining of bodies in space. Vectoral power is a blind projection onto an other that is partly mapped but still mostly imagined.[5]

Yet there is a link between the panoptic strategy and the vectoral strategy of transporting surplus, criminalised people to the antipodes. Both are regimes which combine a field of visibility, a technology for enclosing or traversing it, a discourse and its executors. Where the panoptic strategy is one of intensive vectors, subdividing, scrutinising and enclosing space within the city, transportation was an extensive strategy, based on a technology that can project, plan and traverse the globe. The world becomes the

object of the vector, of the potentiality of movement. Bodies, cargoes, weapons, information: this principally naval technology produced, almost as an afterthought, Botany Bay, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The antipodean other becomes enmeshed in a strategic grid capable of more mundane valuations of economic and strategic advantage. The other becomes a *project*, not a double for the west.[6] In the development of the vectoral regime of power and the antipodean other as a project, everything depended on the development of *technologies of perception*.[7] Techniques for finding a ship's longitudinal position were decisive.[8] This made possible a much more productive relation between the abstract space of maps, charts and solar calculations and the places through which ships passed on their travels. Every technology of perception — from the compass to VR, from the chronometer to the CCD, from the telescope to the smart bomb nosecam — is simultaneously a technology of vectoral or panoptic power.

The Tyranny of Difference First the sea-lanes, then the railroads created abstract lines of movement in space. Take a look at any atlas, and one finds a jagged mass of twisted lines, the contours of nature. Those contours are filled with dots of various sizes, all enclosed with jagged lines that divide the landmass up into a patchwork of spaces. This is the geography of places, our second nature. The dots mark out cities and towns of various sizes, the borders mark out the territories these towns were able to bring under their control in the modern period. The railways and the newspapers between them defined spaces that were integrated economically, politically and culturally. Regionalism gave way to nationalism. This tendency breaks down the separation of places and aggregates them into bigger, more abstract units. A second nature of productive flows overcame the natural forms and barriers of the land.

Now take out a big red magic marker and start to join up all of the dots. Big fat lines between the big towns, smaller ones between the regional centres. From the telegraph to telecommunications, a new geography has been overlaid on top of the first. The tyranny of distance gives way to a tryanny of difference — of information and its ever more fluid motions. What is distinctive about the telegraph is that it begins a regime of communication where information can travel faster than people or things. The telegraph, telephone, television and telecommunications can be grouped together as the media of *telesthesia*. This handy word, which means perception at a distance, describes a qualitatively different regime of communication. When information can move faster and more freely than people or things, its relation to those other movements and to space itself changes. No longer a space of places, we move on to a space of flows — firstly of information, which comes to direct the flows of people, goods, the military and so forth.

If there is a qualitative change in the organisation of culture which deserves the name of postmodern, perhaps this is it. Or perhaps we could call this state of affairs *third nature*. Second nature, or the geography of cities and roads and railways, is progressively overlayed with a third nature of information flows, creating an information landscape that almost entirely covers the old territories. While this process has been going on since the telegraph, it reached critical mass in the late 1970s. The postmodern is thus a catalogue of its symptoms. Cyberspace is a description of its subjective effects. Both postmodernism in theory and cyberspace in literature are explorations of the landscape of third nature. While third nature has been developing for 150 years, it did not reach a state of self-organisation until the period from the mid-1960s to today.

Autonomy Versus Antipodality The perception of postmodernism, cyberspace, third nature — call it what you will — differs from place to place, and it is high time to start breaking down these rather ethno-centric concepts. The video work of Australian artist Peter Callas has mapped some quite particular perceptions of this terrain of third nature in his *Technology as Territory* series, and I would like to acknowledge the influence of his work in enabling me to think and write about telesthesia and the spaces of cultural flow it creates.[9] In *Night's High Noon: An Anti-Terrain* (1988) Callas shows an image of an Aboriginal standing on the beach, watching the first fleet arrive. Cut to an image of the same headland, some time later and a white figure stands on the beach, watching a mushroom cloud rise on the horizon. Callas manages to portray a place which is always in a relation to an elsewhere, which is always defined by its relation to a powerful other. First the British came and colonised. Then the Americans came and coca-colonised. We are no-one, whoever we are, always oscillating in antipodality with elsewheres.

Antipodality is the feeling of being neither here nor there. It is an experience of identity in relation to the other in which the relation always appears more strongly to consciousness than either the identity it founds or the other it projects. Experiencing antipodality is always very unsettling, sometimes a little schizophrenic. There is nothing uniquely Australian about it, although it is a very common anxiety in Australian culture.[10] I think that thesedays the anxiety of antipodality is growing ever more common. The globalisation of trade flows and cultural flows made possible by information technology re-opens the old wounds of identity, breaking the skin at unexpected places.

The volume and velocity of cultural product in circulation globally keeps rising. Popular music, cinema and television (the raw materials of popular culture) are increasingly sold into global markets in accordance with transnational financing and marketing plans. Suddenly cultural identity looks like it is in flux. The relations and the flows are more clearly in view than the sources or destinations. The symptoms of this condition are usually called postmodernism and are thought of historically and parochially. I think they are symptoms of antipodality that must be thought spatially and globally.

The antipodean experience is the product of two technological regimes. The navies of the imperial powers created the modern geography of places

and flows over 200 years ago. The communications technologies of the postmodern era created a much more intensive inter-relation of cultures in space, the consequences of which are still unfolding. The Bicentennial 'celebration of a nation' in 1988 brought the two together.[11] Antipodean difference is the cultural difference created by the vector. The acceleration of the vectors of transnational communication will make the antipodean experience more common. With *CNN* beaming into every part of the globe that can afford it, many now experience antipodality — the feeling of being caught in a network of cultural trajectories beyond your control.[12]

The Virtues of Moral Ambivalence When one knows what it is like to be both the major and the minor pole of these ambivalent relationships of flow, then one can begin to think about the problem of cultural diversity and the information vector with a little more subtlety and empathy than either the technoboosters or the technophobes who usually hold centre stage in mainstream debates. This moral ambivalence to antipodality is I think very common in Australia, and something to be capitalised on methodologically rather than deplored or ignored. In relation to American culture and economic power, Australia is always on the receiving end of antipodality. Witness, for example, the harm done to Australia's already precarious trade position by the grain subsidy war between the United States and the EC. The hypocrisy and indifference to the Australian position manifested by White House mouthpieces over the theft of the Pakistani market by means of the subsidy crutch is exemplary of what it means to have one's identity organised around antipodal flows that the other controls.

On the terrain of cultural flows, a twofold process has occurred. The integration of the space of the continent into one media market has only taken place quite recently, via satellite technology. At one and the same time broadcasters have integrated the national broadcasting space and hooked it up to the global satellite feeds.[13] Until recently, this tendency towards antipodality was countered by local content rules in television broadcasting. As with local content rules in radio, these were successful in promoting the production of high quality, popular media products, which in turn were successfully marketed overseas. Australian TV programming now has a global audience, and Australia is the Number Three supplier of recorded music to the world market. In all, these policies balanced some degree of autonomy with a cosmopolitan media flow. The combined effect of lunatic 'free market' policies and pressure from American program producers to have services, including cultural ones, included under GATT agreements are steadily leading to an erosion of autonomous Australian cultural intervention into the global flow.[14]

On the other hand, there is very little room for moralising or playing the 'victim' in mainstream Australian culture. 'We' may be no-one, but 'we' were also colonisers, enslavers. The imposition of second nature on this continent, as on continental America, was at the expense of indigenous people. The imposition of third nature, via satellite distributed TV, has only just begun. If the first half of this paper owes a debt to the art of Peter Callas,

the second half owes an even greater one to the writings of Eric Michaels, a 'media anthropologist' who worked with the Warlpiri Aboriginal community of the central desert. By contemplating the work of Eric Michaels, I want to highlight the ambivalence of antipodality in Australia.[15] Our experience is a double one, as coloniser and colonised. It ought, I think, to ground an approach to electronic art and media which is at once compassionate, engaged and analytic — three properties the late Eric Michaels unquestionably had.

Resistance is Community *1st April 1985: daily TV transmission by the Warlpiri Media Association begins at Yuendumu, 300 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs on the edge of the Tanami desert in central Australia. At the time they commenced, the programs were unauthorised, unfunded, uncommercial and illegal. The decision to start broadcasting was taken, after 18 months of fruitless negotiations with the Department of Communications for an experimental licence. The studio and transmitter were installed by the community at its own initiative for a cost $4,000.*

Aboriginal communities quite rightly feared that the introduction of satellite TV would have a detrimental impact on their communities. In setting up their own station, the people of Yuendumu wanted to fight fire with fire. Few remote Aboriginal communities have adequate telephone services, so the prospect of being blasted by an information vector from on high before providing a simple set of vectors for people to communicate amongst themselves is certainly disturbing. The question the Yuendumu people faced, as I would interpret it, is this: if in the postmodern world, one cannot stop the vectoral lines of telesthesia from extending third nature out to remote, traditional communities, how can those communities stop their relationship of antipodality with other, more powerful message producers from overcoming their cultural autonomy?

The Yuendumu community had many years experience of 16mm film and VHS home video. They do not underestimate the dangers or potentials of 'new media', and neither should we. Film posed particular problems because it meant assembling people together in close proximity. Traditional restrictions on association were difficult to maintain: mothers-in-law would be too close to sons-in-law; 'promised brides' would be too close to amorous and unsuitable suitors. The films were often shown in settings such as schools or churches, where whites would control the circumstances of discussion and interpretation of the film. The content of even the most innocuous Hollywood films, which stress a romantic concept of 'love' come in conflict with a social order that stresses the transactual role of marriage in connecting people together in ways that sustain and develop the memory of the past and relationality in the present.

Home video provides a partial contrast with this situation. At least with home video the vector connects Hollywood to the central desert people in small groups in their own camps, without white control over the viewing circumstances. This has some at least potentially positive effects. People

can choose what they want to watch, thus escaping from the paternalism of white authorities. Not surprisingly, things like Kung Fu movies were very popular, not least because in them it is mostly whites who are on the receiving end of those gracefully choreographed kicks.

The possible harm or benefit of vectors from without is in part determined by the ability of the local community to control the conditions of reception and interpretation. There is a lesson in this for all media workers involved in the extension and deepening of third nature: rather than orienting media development to a universal goal, Eric Michaels would commit us to enabling the maintenance and development of *autonomous communications practices*. Not a universal model of a future productive system, but diverse and self managed communicational nets. For Michaels, this is what it means to be committed ethically *for a cultural future*.

The most challenging part of Michaels' work lies in its attempt to map out just how communications in the western desert works. Michaels shows a strong connection between information and the land. The significance of this is that in the western imaginary, it is possible to conceive of agriculture or even industry as material practices based on the land, based on the extraction of matter from the earth, on transforming and distributing it in determinate relations. To imagine a connection between *information* and the land, on the other hand, is much harder. Alongside the quantitative media of money, modern media vectors have deterritorialised flows of qualitative information from any sense of place or experience. In showing the Warlpiri confrontation with such a vector, Michaels shows us an experience of information which most of us have lost. *We no longer have roots, we have aerials.*

Warlpiri society retains its autonomy because it retains and reproduces social relations aimed at *restricting information flow*. Aboriginal culture contains mechanisms that regulate the geographic movement of information and which delimit the degree of interpretation and invention possible in its constitutive texts, the "Law" or "Dreaming". The Dreaming always privileges the processes of cultural reproduction over its products. In other words, sensitive information does not proliferate or mutate, although its distribution is flexible and there is room for innovation. This movement and change, however, is permitted in the interests of preserving the relations that produce and distribute information in the first place. It is with this kind of restrictive yet flexible, binding yet non-hierarchical cultural technology that Aboriginal cultures "survived the white man's world" for the last 200 years — and thrived for many thousands of years before that.

We No Longer Have Roots, We Have Aerials Michaels was interested in diverse *practices* of reproducing autonomous culture rather than a single model. In his essay on the Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras — Sydney's biggest regular public carnival and one of the biggest celebrations of the gay and lesbian community in the world — it is significant that the questions he asks are "Why does carnivale persist in the age of TV and mass media?

How does it encourage *communitas* in an age of isolated, alienated individualism?" Queer culture is a rather different example to the Warlpiri of much the same issue: how to retain cultural autonomy in the face of massive penetration of cultural space by the vector. The answer lies in retaining the ability to create spaces and norms of interpretation and to reproduce these through time. Both the queer communities and Aboriginal communities can deploy any and every kind of cultural technology to do so. Struggling for a cultural future means absorbing and transforming the media flow which traverses the space of identity; it means keeping up with the media tools that are the weapons with which communities can struggle with antipodality.

Sustaining *communion* means developing specific kinds of *information restraint*. The interests of cultural autonomy and opposition to the centralisation of power is not always served by the unrestrained flow of information. The enlightenment ethic of free information flow was essential to overcoming the secretive *ancien regime*. It is still often applicable today — but it is not a universal model of communicative progress. Increased communications flows are not steps towards a 'global village' or a self conscious 'noosphere' — as some of the more ethnocentric fantasies of the media arts community would have it. Everything depends on who gets to do what with the media flows that increasingly traverse a global space of third nature.

The purpose of the elaborate restrictions on who can say what to whom about what in Warlpiri society has a dual purpose: to elevate the reproduction of a functioning culture over the production of information for its own sake, but also to ensure that authority over passing on the Law is distributed over a fair number of individuals so that too much authority cannot accumulate in too few hands. Competence is limited and varies from place to place and situation to situation. Competence is acquired partly by birthright, partly by residing in a given area, and partly by attendance at the appropriate rituals and visits to significant sites. While older people, particularly men, will tend to have more authority, and hence licence to distribute or interpret information than younger people, the culture assures that some authority and competence will accrue to all participants in Warlpiri society, including people associated by marriage or simply by living with the same 'mob' and sharing experience with them. There may also be ritual exchanges with other groups, particularly neighbouring ones.

Michaels did not just observe these cultural practices as they may have operated in 'traditional' settings; he also observed how they were adapted to new media, particularly video. At Yuendumu, the process of producing video was adapted to fit in with traditional social relations, particularly those for the ritual activities. New elaborations of old rules governing the distribution of sacred information and restrictions on mentioning the recently deceased were developed though a consultative and sometimes contentious process. Video was used to record trips to sacred sites and to recount important secular stories. One such visit contains a number of

long, slow pans across the landscape, which Michaels finds a little tedious as an uninitiated viewer, but which contains images of land redolent with varying and rich lodes of meaning for people who have learned the songs and stories of the site. The traditional ritual roles of story-teller and witness or 'helper' were adapted to video production by the Warlpiri by dividing camera 'crew' and on screen 'talent' roles according to traditional kinship rules. In short, left to their own creative resources, the Warlpiri can adapt media technology to their own needs — and use video as a tool for cultural autonomy. Whether such autonomy can persist and adapt to satellite distributed TV is another matter, but what counts is the struggle for cultural futures, out of which autonomy and difference emerges.

The Warlpiri form of social organisation is quite properly described as *rhizomatic* in that every individual is connected to others via networks of kin, place and history, but these loose and sometimes conflicting connections are not something one can draw a boundary around and describe as a "community".[16] There is no "social body" here just as there is no territory around which one can place a boundary. Both the land and kinship are linked by networks which link up in many different directions. What makes Aboriginal society so original is that it can reproduce networks of identity without drawing fixed boundaries around them. The identity of who one is, what collectivity one belongs to, the meaning of a site and who has rights and obligations in respect to it, differ situationally, depending on who is present, where, and with whom.

This whole culture is able to reproduce itself, to attribute quite stable significance to places and people, while maintaining a *mobile* relation to both the social and physical environment. It is as if the whole of central Australia were a space of many little mobile vectors, movements of individuals and movements of groups, all in motion relative to each other. Some movements have meaning only within the lifetime of the participants — people are always telling stories about who did what where with whom. Others take place in a grid that is quite durable and indeed is maintained by movement, not in spite of it. The grid is the dreaming tracks, the so-called "songlines" that regulate the mobile set of vectors which is the Warlpiri and through which Warlpiri country passes over into Pitjanjara or Pintupi and many other "fuzzy sets" of identity all around.

Becoming Abstract It has taken a long time for white Australians to wake up to the extraordinary cultural forms Aboriginal people have relied upon to survive the 200 years since invasion. Putting side by side the mechanisms of cultural autonomy deployed by traditional Aboriginal Australians confronted by white Australians, and white Australians confronted with global cultural flows, illustrates that the problem of sustaining autonomy and cultural diversity on the cultural landscape of third nature is a problem that involves diverse solutions and quite a number of different scales — from that of the individual and community to that of the nation. In thinking about new media tools and the new vectoral trajectories they may open up, we can do worse than look at historical examples of particular

strategies of survival. We need to think tactically about every form of communication, new and old. Media are never simply good or evil; they are always contingent.

In effect I am arguing for two kinds of theory which are normally considered very separate and incompatible. On the one hand, we need to look at the long-term tendency towards the development of more and more *abstract* spaces of movement and flow, created out of every more *flexible* vectors. This process has two, overlapping phases, which are also analytically distinct. The first is a regime of imperial transport; the second of vectoral telesthesia. This second proliferation, of communication vectors radically abstracted and separated from territory, is I think the fundamental movement giving rise to symptoms of postmodernism. These developments have to be thought of as abstract, extensive and historicist, but not as universal. Abstraction is always developed organically out of contingent and local experience. Importing other people's generalised theories unmodified is itself symptomatic of antipodal domination. Hence in this essay I have tried to situate conventional theoretical problematics in communications within Australian cultural history and theoretical practice.

On the other hand, the growth of an abstract space of third nature, covering the whole globe, is in no sense an unambiguously good thing. The enlightenment mythology of the unalloyed good of knowledge and information can mask a very damaging antipodality, in which powerful centres create and control vectors of information. Anglo-Celtic Australians know only too well what it is like to live in the shadow of the powerful flow of the American media. Unlike Europeans, we have neither a strong tradition nor an autonomous language with which to maintain a communion of identity. The *historical trajectory* of the vector puts white Australia in a similar predicament to Aboriginal communities, which have great cultural resources for resistance but have been systematically denied the material resources for *cultural survival*. These situations are however quite different, and have to be approached tactically in their particularities. They may, however, contain pragmatic stories of failure and success worth communicating to other, equally contingent and local contexts.

If the *theory* of media development has to begin from the most abstract aspect, the *ethics* of media practice must begin from the particular, the different, the contingent and the tactical. We no longer have roots, we have aerials. The dialectic of autonomy and antipodality structures an emerging politics of relationality and flow rather than of identity and locality. Our art and technology has to be rethought for this world of third nature we have made, which is very rapidly remaking us. In the third world, people still struggle to wrest freedom from necessity, culture from nature. In the first world, we are having a hard time wresting the freedom for a cultural future from second nature, from the environments we made but which now make us. Increasingly, we struggle to wrest *autonomy from third* nature, from the antipodal flow of communications and the information landscape it creates.

1 Brian Toohey, 'Bases Play a Crucial Role', *The Age*, 3 February, 1991

2 See McKenzie Wark, 'On Technological Time: Virilio's Overexposed City', *Arena*, No. 83, 1988

3 Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, Oxford University Press, 1989

4 McKenzie Wark, 'From Fordism to Sonyism: Perverse Readings of the New World Order', *New Formations*, No. 16, 1992

5 Compare Bernard Smith's neglected masterpiece *European Vision and the South Pacific* with Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1977

6 Paul Foss, 'Theatrum Nondum Cogitorum' in *The Foreign Bodies Papers*, Local Consumption Series 1, Sydney, 1981

7 McKenzie Wark, 'The Logistics of Perception', *Meanjin*, Vol 49, No. 1, Autumn 1990.

8 Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986

9 Peter Callas, 'Some Liminal Aspects of the Technology Trade', *Mediamatic*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1990

10 See Ross Gibson's essays, especially his reading of Mad Max in *South of the West*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992

11 Cf Meaghan Morris, 'Panorama', in Paul Foss (ed), *Islands in the Stream*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1988

12 McKenzie Wark, 'News Bites: WAR TV in the Gulf', *Meanjin*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1991

13 Tom O'Regan, 'Towards a High Communications Policy', *Continuum*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1988

14 Stuart Cunningham, *Framing Culture: Criticism and Policy in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992

15 Eric Michaels, 'Constraints on Knowledge in an Economy of Oral Information', *Current Anthropology*, October 1985; *The Aboriginal Invention of Television*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986; *For a Cultural Future*, Artspace Art & Criticism Monograph Series, Sydney 1987; 'My Essay on Postmodernism', in *Art & Text*, No. 25, June 1987. See also the special issue of *Continuum*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1990

16 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, Athlone Press, London, 1984; Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984