

NEWSLETTER #38, May 2009

This scourge of artistic apartheid

How the world sees Australia's 'protection' of its Indigenous art: Jay Griffiths, *The Guardian*

If Stonehenge were bulldozed for a McDonald's, or the collections of the British Library were burnt to heat the Hilton, there would be a furore in the press. But a site of equivalent spiritual, intellectual and artistic importance to Aboriginal people – referred to as an ancient university, part of their ritual, sacred culture and songlines – is under similar threat, and the chances are you won't have heard of it.

The site includes what is probably the oldest artistic representation of the human face anywhere in the world. Pause on that a moment. That fact alone makes it iconic for all human beings. Carved with huge, haunting eyes and an expression of vivid intensity, it is one of hundreds of thousands of rock carvings in Western Australia's Burrup peninsula, known as Murujuga to Aboriginal peoples. Some carvings are at least 30,000 years old and it is even possible that the site is twice the age of the famous Lascaux cave paintings. But there are plans to site a liquid natural gas plant here, and parts of the area have already been destroyed, with images either pulverised or ripped away from where they belong. When this happens, Aboriginal people say, part of a songline is destroyed forever, it is "like our Bible torn apart".

The World Monuments Fund has named it as one of the world's most endangered sites, and archaeologists want it listed as a World Heritage Site, but so far haven't been successful.



An Aboriginal woman sits by rock carvings in Western Australia.

Photograph: Medford Taylor/Getty

Why? Because it's part of a long story, what I'd call the "intellectual apartheid" which the dominant culture operates towards Indigenous people, refusing to believe that Indigenous philosophy is worthy of the title, that the Amazon has its rigorous medical schools, or that a Chartres could exist, in ritual, in the Australian outback. Tellingly, until 1967, Aboriginal people were legally classed as "flora and fauna" –

that is, not capable of rising from nature into culture.

Today marks the 50th anniversary of CP Snow's lecture *The Two Cultures*, which argued that to be culturally literate it is not enough to know only about the arts, but about sciences too. It prompts a far bigger question: the dominant culture today renders itself culturally illiterate by not paying attention to the world's cultures. In the days of empire, European history began making its false claims that there was an "expansion of the known world" which heralded an

"age of discovery". The truth was the opposite – in destroying human cultures everywhere, the sum of the world's knowledge was reduced.

>>> **Read more** of this article at *The Guardian*, UK:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/07/art-aborigines>

• Jay Griffiths is the author of *Wild: An Elemental Journey*.

Read Nicolas Rothwell's excellent article on the past and present situation of Burrup Peninsula art in *The Australian*:

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25166085-16947,00.html>

From Jan Aitken:

In 2007 I was on a trip through the Pilbara. We called at the Tjukurba Gallery in Wiluna. It was explained to us that some of the artists were away painting along the Canning Stock Route as part of a huge project to record the Aboriginal story of the famous track. Wiluna is at its southern limit. The final phase in this heart-stirring project will be an exhibition at the National Museum in 2010. I will be driving up to Canberra to see this exhibition – perhaps we could have an NRG adventure. Watch this space!

See: <http://www.form.net.au/indigenous-development/canning-stock-route-project> :

The Canning Stock Route Project is an unprecedented cultural alliance involving nine Aboriginal arts and cultural organisations: Tjukurba Gallery, Martumili Artists, Yulparija Artists, Mangkaja Artists, Ngurra Artists, Paruku IPA, Warlayirti Artists, Papunya Tula and Kayili Artists.

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W. E. H. Stanner

The Past Matters Festival, to be held in Eltham on 29 and 30 May, will join with Robert Manne and Melinda Hinkson and others in their revival of noted and esteemed anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner. Stanner's book of essays, *White Man Has No Dreaming*, has been out of print for years and virtually unprocurable. Robert Manne has organised the reprinting of many of the articles in this volume so we once again have access to Stanner's words. And what words! He is a consummate writer with many a memorable phrase which carries within it the ugly, unacknowledged aspect of white relations with Aboriginal people, his unashamed admiration and love of the warriors and wise men of the tribes and his persistent fascination with Aboriginal religion and the attempts of white civilisation to grasp its depth and spiritual significance.

- Assimilationist policy : 'a moral impertinence of the first order'
- A description of a *punj* ceremony of the Murinbata people: 'An observer feels that he is in the presence of true congregation, a full sociality at a peak of intimacy, altruism and unison.'

Nillumbik Reconciliation Group
& ELTHAMbookshop
present
The Past Matters 2009
An Appreciation of Difference

- The Aborigines: 'a melancholy footnote'. 'One wonders what equivalent astigmatism may affect our contemporary vision...One of them is a certain inability to grasp that on the evidence the Aborigines have always been looking for two things: a decent union of their lives with ours but on terms that let them preserve their own identity, not their inclusion wily-nilly in our scheme of things and a fake identity, but development within a new way of life that has the imprint of their own ideas.'

- Us: the 'extraordinary intellectual struggle which we have had to live through before seeing the Aborigines in a perspective that is at one and the same time well-informed, humane and respectful.'

Inspired to hear and read more? Come to Past Matters for stimulating and challenging encounters with Aboriginal, academic and cultural writers – thinkers for our time.

Jan Aitken

(The Stanner presentations are also supported by *Amnesty International Victorian Indigenous Human Rights Awareness Group* and by *Diamond Valley Oxfam*.)

The Past Matters – culture, history, family, memory, reconciliation

Friday 29th May, beginning at 6.30pm; Saturday 30th May, starting at 10.00am

Further information and bookings: Eltham Bookshop 9439 8700
or download a brochure from our website: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~nrgp/>

Samson & Delilah

In past years NRG has shown a couple of short films made by Indigenous director Warwick Thornton: *Mimi*, and *Green Bush*. While these films had a quirky individuality and an insight into the Indigenous experience, none of his films prepared us for this amazing first feature.

Warwick has described how he went to funding bodies with his idea for 'a teenage love story where the central characters don't talk to each other' – somehow he got the money!

However, the communication between the young stars is so powerful that it's a surprise to remember that there wasn't any dialogue between them – sidelong glances, hand movements, writing on a wall and childish actions are all that are needed. Warwick has spoken about how he remembers the awkwardness of teenage love, so he has been able to guide and empathise with the actors while still, one feels, remaining open to being guided by them.

It's tempting to say that *Samson & Delilah* is the first truly Indigenous feature film, but that would be unfair to Ivan Sen and others. However, while Ivan deals with problems thrown up by urban and rural environments, Warwick's film tackles full on the squalor and deprivation of remote outstations.

The treatment is confronting for everyone – the Indigenous residents of the community and the parents who don't look after their children, the people of Alice Springs who have no outreach programs for troubled teenagers, and of course the federal government is unlikely to be pleased by the image it creates at the Cannes Film Festival this month. So be it – **see this film!**

Sasha Trikojus



Director Warwick Thornton,
with Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson

Jim Schembri, *The Age*: "About 60 seconds into *Samson & Delilah* you realise Australian cinema is never going to be the same. ... It is the most confronting, powerful, honest and important film about Indigenous culture yet made in this country."

David Stratton, *The Australian*: "Anyone who cares about Australian cinema should see this film. I'd go further and suggest that anyone who cares about Australia should see it. *Samson and Delilah* is, quite simply, one of the finest films ever made in this country."