Reclaiming Indigenous heritage: developing affective dialogue through cross-cultural media collaboration in the moving image museum

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Abstract
Historically, the representations of Indigenous people in both film and museums have reflected their disempowerment in exerting control over their heritage. However in recent decades, more formalised approaches to collaborative and inclusive practices in these areas have created spaces for Indigenous voices to be heard. Using the Australian Centre for the Moving Image’s (ACMI) *Screen Worlds* exhibition as a case study, this article explores how methods of cross-cultural collaboration with Indigenous curators, media producers and community representatives lead to an interpretive design whereby Indigenous heritage is reclaimed. *Screen Worlds* ‘Dreaming in Colour’ exhibit utilises multimedia, such as film and photographic images, to embody a narrative of Aboriginal self-determination and resilience. Further, the use of multimedia displays uses film language, specifically that of the cinematic close up of the face, as an affective means with which to engage the non-Indigenous visitor in cross-cultural dialogue. ACMI visitors are able to listen to the Indigenous voices that have been historically silenced, consequently emphasising the importance of using multimedia as a method of provoking dialogue, affectively engaging visitors, and producing shifting cultural discourses. ACMI and *Screen Worlds*, as representative of moving image museums, allows for the productive exploration of these ideas and possibilities.

Introduction
In her interview for the Australian Centre for the Moving Image’s (ACMI) the *Blak Wave* exhibit, filmmaker Rachel Perkins recalls growing up in an Australia where Indigenous people were rarely seen in films and excluded from the filmmaking process, subsequently ignoring a more complete Australian story. This has also been the case with the representation of Indigenous culture in museums, where Indigenous people have historically been excluded from asserting control over their heritage. However, there are increasing moves towards more inclusive, ethical and collaborative practices in both heritage and museum work, which see Indigenous communities reclaiming their culture through the reinterpretation of cultural objects connected to traditional stories, customs, memories, and lore. For a moving image museum, such as *Screen Worlds* at ACMI, the collaboration with Indigenous curators, media producers and communities sees not only the use of objects as a means to explore intangible heritage, but also the inclusion of multimedia—film, video and photographic images—to embody a narrative of self-determination and resilience in the recuperation of past discrimination and trauma.

Located in *Screen Worlds* overarching theme labelled ‘Dreaming in Colour’, the three exhibits entitled *Strangers With Cameras*, *The Subject Speaks Back* and *Blak Wave* heavily engages the use of video and images to tell a story of transitional Indigenous representation and production in Australian media from the beginning of cinema in the late 1800s to the present. The
power these exhibits have is to illustrate how the moving image can facilitate and reconstruct Indigenous identity from a community perspective by using the language of cinema. Therefore, it’s not just a matter of integrating multimedia in the museum space, but also how this specific content on the subject of Australian film history, via multimedia formats, begins a cross-cultural engagement between Indigenous communities, museums and visitors.

The integration of film as a part of broader multimedia displays is, of course, not only limited to museums focused on moving image history and culture. Film and video is becoming further integrated into exhibitions of all types, adding another dimension to more traditional object displays. The use of visual content allows for more intangible connections to subject matter through its ability to communicate oral histories and personal experiences either in conjunction with material objects, or as Fiona Cameron (2007) has argued, becoming an object in its own right. Cameron’s point becomes increasingly important when looking at the moving image museum, which I am defining as a museum or gallery space (or a kind of hybrid of the two) that exhibits the history and contemporary culture of screen media. Further, as Andrea Witcomb (2007: 46) has noted, ‘multimedia installations also offer the opportunity to explicitly explore the possibilities of affective responses for the production of cultural narratives which seek to work across cultural divides.’ Using this as a starting point, my aim is to consider how the multimedia elements used in ‘Dreaming in Colour’s’ interpretative design embodies and communicates a narrative of Indigenous self-determination in the contexts of Indigenous media production and museum exhibition.

As a result, the concept of affect as it pertains to heritage and museum studies is central to understanding how this dialogue takes place between exhibition and visitor. Broadly characterised as, ‘an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as [author’s emphasis] the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces and intensities’ (Gegg & Seigworth 2010: 1), ‘affect’ is a useful tool for conceptualising how visitors can relate and engage with museum narratives (or heritage places) on more empathetic levels and particularly felt through bodily sensations. Emma Waterton (2014: 824-825) notes the capacities for heritages sites, of which she references the museum as an example, to be considered in relation to what they can do, instead of the more historically dominant idea of heritage as a thing to be looked at or gazed upon.

The use of multimedia in the interpretation design of Indigenous exhibits in Screen Worlds therefore, elicits a shared gaze by virtue of its ability to focus in on the Indigenous human subject and their face. The use of close ups as an element of film language allows for visitors to recognise the other on the level of human-to-human engagement. The narrative of Aboriginal self-determination due to the cross-cultural collaborative process at ACMI is subsequently embodied, not only in recognition of the Indigenous voice heard throughout the exhibits, but also through the power of the face and in the affective experience.

**Indigenous heritage: negotiating representations**

Historically, the representations of Indigenous people and heritage in both film and museums have reflected the effects of European colonialism, if represented at all. As Louise Douglas (2008) notes of Australia’s early exhibitions in the 1800s, Aboriginal Australians were rarely included amongst exhibit displays whose primary aim was to show Australia as a place of industrial progress and civilised society. Exhibitions purported ‘the idea of Australia as an egalitarian and classless society, where advancement and prosperity could be gained for any man or woman with commitment and enterprise…’ (Douglas 2008: 25). Indigenous peoples were not included in this vision of a progressive Australia. Indigenous objects that were collected were usually put on display at ethnographic museums, such as those objects brought back to England during the colonial period and used as a demonstration of British imperial power by concentrating on the tangible culture of people seen as ‘exotic’, ‘pre-literate’, ‘primitive’, ‘simple’, ‘savage’ or ‘vanishing…’ (Lidchi 1997: 161). Subsequently, Australia’s first peoples were seen as a potential hindrance to colonial endeavours—objects of scientific and ethnographic inquiry or ignored from representation entirely.
Similarly, images of Indigenous people in early Australian cinema, from around the late 1890s, were generally seen in ethnographic filmmaking where their portrayal was constructed from a European perspective. Lester Bostock (2007: 8) writes that while Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander people have often been the subject of these films, they did not have control over these images of themselves. He notes that some of the first images of Indigenous Australians in film were of Mer Islander dancers in 1898. However, in fictional filmmaking during this era, such as some of the 1920s silent Ned Kelly movies and up until more recently, a majority of these depictions were consistently presenting Indigenous Australians as either uncivilised, menacing, exotic, mysterious or playful (Krausz 2003). In these instances, Indigenous identity and culture were distorted and constructed through a European colonial lens that saw them as an inferior race.

However, this history and evidence of colonial dominance is marked by examples of Indigenous resistance, negotiation and action. For instance, Denis Byrne (1996) suggests that the incoming of the first European settlers produced two oppositional trends regarding the development of Aboriginality after 1788. The first sees Aboriginal people engaging with settlers through the transaction and recontextualisation of European goods, such as the wearing of dresses, trousers and jackets as a means to garner favour with settlers, as well as evidence suggesting that Aboriginals desired particular European objects over others (Byrne 1996: 82-83). This example provides a different understanding to the primitive or uncivilised Aboriginal, instead suggesting that Aboriginal people had a clear understanding of the processes of negotiation and exchange across cultures. The second trend Byrne (1996: 82) observes is perhaps one that is more familiar with how Aboriginal heritage has been interpreted in spaces like the museum, which is via pre-settler Indigenous objects and remains seen as representative of an ‘authentic Aboriginality’. This trend reinforces Aboriginality as ‘Other’ and as a symbol of European progress. Byrne (1996: 91) also suggests this to be one of the ‘perils’ of heritage practice, ‘its privileging of the past... in the ‘wrong hands’’, which leads to imaginary constructs of the Other and the ignoring or forgetting of the continual living heritage of Indigenous people. This indicates the need for the ‘right hands’ in heritage practice, those of Indigenous communities themselves.

In more recent decades, we can see a transition occurring in who is speaking about Indigenous culture and heritage and how it is being included in the museum space, with increasing dialogue between museums and Indigenous communities in an effort to break down the aforementioned imaginary constructs. Chris Healy (2008: 133) identifies changes in the ways museums are operating when approaching Indigenous heritage, where the relationships between museum practitioners and Indigenous communities is ‘debated and contested and renegotiated in significant ways’. In some instances, as Healy (2008) notes, museums and other institutions within the heritage field are implementing policies and procedures around the collection and exhibition of Indigenous culture, especially in light of ongoing requests for the repatriation of Indigenous objects. A number of documents and discussion papers have also been produced by cultural organisations such as Museums Australia (Code of Ethics 1999) and the Ask First guidelines to respecting Indigenous heritage places and values published by the Australian Heritage Commissions in 2002.

These moves toward more inclusive and ethical museum practices are relatively new, however, and processes of negotiation are continually being refined. What has come out of these dialogues are more collaborative initiatives between museums and Indigenous communities. For example, the First Peoples exhibition housed at the Melbourne Museum’s Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, is a co-curated collaboration between the museum staff and the Yulendj Group of Elders. The group, comprised of Koorie community members and representatives, worked with the curatorial staff to ensure the exhibition ‘accords with both Aboriginal ‘Law and knowledge’ systems and western knowledge systems’ (Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre n.d.). In scenarios like these, we see museums taking on a more facilitatory role in the exhibition of Aboriginal heritage, while Indigenous communities are exerting more control over how their heritage is interpreted within the exhibition space.

Consequently, exhibitions including Indigenous content appear more focused on the intangible qualities either emerging from Indigenous objects or presented through carefully curated
multimedia exhibits. Laurajane Smith (2006) describes intangible heritage as engaging with stories, memories and subjective meanings, which becomes important for contemporary approaches to Indigenous heritage due to the emphasis on remembrance through oral storytelling. Although historically a Western medium, film has a similar function as a storytelling method, providing opportunities to record Indigenous oral heritage, as well as a means to articulate contemporary issues to multicultural audiences. For example, Muruwari matriarch Essie Coffey produced *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978), a film focused on a narrative of resistance to colonial assimilation and the struggle to hold on to traditional cultural identity. As Marcia Langton (1994: 89-90) notes of Coffey’s work amongst more recent examples from filmmakers such as Tracey Moffat and Ivan Sen, the Indigenous importance placed on ‘the visual and oral values of traditional life’ is shown through an increase in both Indigenous film production and cross-cultural co-productions with European Australian filmmakers. Langton’s point is pertinent in that it suggests the film format is a modern mode for the telling of Indigenous stories, a way to both pass down culture and heritage to future Indigenous generations, but also to foster cross-cultural understanding and dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This is where the moving image museum with its focus on film and multimedia in its interpretation design is able to present this kind of storytelling audio-visually, as a vehicle to explore both past and present, and utilise the language of film to create affective experiences.

Moving image museums, such as ACMI’s *Screen Worlds*, are in a unique position to use media history to explore stories, memories and experiences. As suggested above, film offers the opportunity for communities of people to engage with and build upon their culture and identity through the process of filmmaking in all genres, or actively view films and identify with the images they are watching in particular ways. Film has the power to move its viewers, affect them emotionally or cognitively, and challenge audiences’ value systems through the use of specific narrative and audiovisual techniques (cinematography, editing, sound). When placed within the exhibition context, film can have the same effect, mediating history and exploring present situations by using filmic examples as illustrations of key historical events, the evolution of social and political ideologies, and exploring broader social issues on global, national or local community levels. In the case of *Screen Worlds*, it is through the cross-cultural collaborative process between Indigenous community representatives, curators, media specialists, and ACMI staff, that the Indigenous voice is heard throughout the exhibition via its film content. This voice produces an educational, affective and sometimes confronting narrative to do with the history of Indigenous representation through to more recent concerns and aspirations.

**Cross-cultural collaboration in *Screen Worlds***

ACMI is located in the culture and arts precinct of Federation Square in Melbourne. Prior to moving to its current location, ACMI was previously known as the State Film Centre of Victoria, whose primary function was as a lending library of film and television in Melbourne and regional Victoria. This was its mandate from its beginnings in 1946 up until the 1970s, however, with the introduction of the *State Film Centre of Victoria Council Act 1983*, the centre included a revised function that was seen as a precursor to ACMI’s current exhibition and display formats (Simondson 2012). In 2002, and incorporated by the *Film Act 2001*, the centre was rebranded as the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and expanded into film screenings and temporary exhibition spaces while maintaining a pared back lending service. The present configuration of ACMI now includes Gallery 1 for major temporary exhibitions; Gallery 2 for smaller temporary exhibitions; the permanent *Screen Worlds* exhibition; two studio spaces that house workshops, talks and educational programs; two cinemas; and the Australian Mediatheque where visitors and researchers can access the media collection to watch onsite. As public programs manager, Helen Simondson (2015, pers. comm., 11 May) points out, ACMI is a kind of hybrid of cultural spaces somewhere between an art gallery, a museum, a film access collection, and a cinema.

*Screen Worlds* opened in 2009 and encompasses a vast history of moving image culture, from the beginning of film to television, games, animation and mobile technologies. Visitors are greeted by a cacophony of objects, sounds and futuristic white pods. The main areas of *Screen Worlds* are labelled ‘Emergence’, ‘Voices’ and ‘Sensation’, each with a focus on various historical and contemporary moments in the evolution of local and international screen media.
The rationale for the conceptualisation and building of the *Screen Worlds* exhibition was to anchor ACMI’s purpose for audiences, as due to its hybridised form, there was some visitor confusion as to what ACMI was. This required a large collaborative team from all areas of the organisation to work together, initially in the decision-making process of what to include and exclude from an immense history of screen culture. This team comprised of not only staff from the exhibitions section, but also from other departments like public programs, as well as external local and international consultants. However, as Simondson (2015, pers. comm., 11 May) has lamented, there were no permanent Indigenous staff working on the *Screen Worlds* content at ACMI during this time. As a result, a number of the *Screen Worlds* project team pushed heavily for Indigenous collaborators in the form of researchers and curators to work on the subject matter and liaise with local Indigenous communities. This was seen as an ‘essential and crucial’ (Simondson 2015, pers. comm., 11 May) aspect of *Screen Worlds’ conception and planning of Indigenous content.

The collaborative process began with the formation of an advisory group consisting of various specialist representatives from external organisations such as the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA); the Koorie Heritage Trust, in particular now former CEO, Jason Eades; Indigenous community media organisations; local universities; and film and video production specialists, such as Kimba Thompson from Sista Girl Productions, and culture and art specialist, Jirra Lulla. Both Thompson and Lulla took leading curatorial roles throughout the project. Walter Saunders, former head of the Australian Film Commission’s (AFC) (now Screen Australia) Indigenous Branch, was appointed as a project leader and advisor on the curation of Indigenous content and led much of the research. As Saunders was still at the AFC during the production of *Screen Worlds*, ACMI felt he could contribute with both an Indigenous cultural perspective as well as film perspective. Indigenous elders Aunty Joy Murphy (Wurundjuri) and Aunty Carolyn Briggs (Boon wurrung) were also consulted throughout the process, as well as various Indigenous community members from broader Victorian nations. The net for Indigenous collaborators was cast widely to begin with, and although not all invitees accepted, a core group began to form. At this point, the focus was on what the aim of the Indigenous content should be, the challenges in the process of putting it together, how to best begin the process, the big points and issues that needed to be considered, and what the representatives would like to see exhibited (Simondson 2015, pers. comm., 11 May).

A key message that came out of the collaborative process was that the Indigenous content needed to be integrated throughout the *Screen Worlds* exhibition and not made a separate space unto itself. This recalls Perkins personal reflection above, where in terms of *Screen Worlds’ broader Australian focus, the exhibition was to present the full Australian story—not just a European version. There are key displays in ‘Emergence’ for instance, such as the footage of the Mer Island dancers; however, the Indigenous content is most clearly visible in *Voices*. *Voices* combines material objects and multimedia to tell the story of Australian screen media from past to present. Within this narrative lies a triptych of exhibits called ‘Dreaming in Colour’. It houses the three interrelated exhibits that depict Indigenous media representation and its role in the shaping of Aboriginal cultural identity.

The original and stock footage used within each of the three exhibits were curated and produced predominantly by Indigenous members of the project team. Beginning the ‘Dreaming in Colour’ narrative is *Strangers with Cameras*, curated in collaboration with Saunders and the Koorie Heritage Trust. This exhibit portrays the very early history of Indigenous representation in Australian film and television and the problems inherent within these representations due to non-Indigenous collaboration. Photographs surrounding the video footage are sourced from the Trust’s extensive collection of historical images, which they have been trying to connect to Indigenous families. In a reciprocal agreement, ACMI have been assisting the Trust in researching the names of the many Aboriginal faces in the photos and early films, as historically, only European subjects were ever named. As a result, certain photos were chosen for display while also providing an important historical point of discussion within the exhibit’s overall content.

Kimba Thompson conducted and filmed interviews with the *Blak Wave* subjects, Rachel Perkins, Warwick Thornton, Beck Cole, Darlene Johnson and Ivan Sen. She had the freedom to explore
where the narrative would go, establishing the topics of discussion with the subjects for each segment. They were filmed in a darkened cinema, an apt choice of location considering the subject matter, with each producer detailing their history and relationship to Indigenous media production. Some producers recall memories from childhood, most give their opinion on the history and contemporary state of Indigenous media relations, and all talk about their own work and where they see the future of Indigenous production in Australia. Thompson doesn’t appear in these clips as the interviewer, so the visitor is only engaging with and hearing from the subjects themselves in a direct dialogue.

Finally, The Subject Speaks Back was produced in collaboration with actor and filmmaker, Tom E. Lewis. The footage in this section emerged from a documentary idea that Lewis was working on, but was having difficulty getting off the ground. ACMI offered to help fund the larger documentary project for a shorter, edited package for the exhibit, which concentrates on the issue of Indigenous representation in film and television. This theme is explored through interviews with performers such as Gary Foley, Aaron Pedersen, Rachael Maza, and Lewis himself. All three exhibits have been produced with the specific intention of displaying a strong Indigenous presence in Screen Worlds and ACMI more generally.

The Indigenous voice speaks

Before looking more deeply at the effect of multimedia in Screen Worlds to both communicate and embody a message of Indigenous self-determination and conciliation, I would like to pause for a moment to further discuss the narrative and general design of these exhibits in reference to ideas of memory, conflict and storytelling. All three exhibits in ‘Dreaming in Colour’ work towards recuperating and challenging the effects of Australian colonialism that are evident not only in society, but also in the history of Australian media production.

Strangers with Cameras acts as introduction to the narrative by giving a historical context for the following two exhibits more personal dialogue, as well as offering a look towards the future of Indigenous media production. The exhibit utilises still photos and two screens, one showing a three minute interview with Saunders and the other playing a looped reel of photographs depicting some of the results of ACMI and the Koorie Heritage Trust’s aforementioned joint project (in Figure 1). This is an important part of the exhibit that I will focus on in the following section. In his interview, Saunders sits right of frame while images and scenes from early through to more contemporary films and television programs are composited behind him. However, as Saunders makes mention of Indigenous community members and media producers dissatisfaction with the racist and narrow representations of their people in media, a still shot of a newspaper clipping on the subject of the Stolen Generations appears behind him. This moment marks the turning point in the video’s narrative that connects its mise-en-scène to the political message of all three exhibits. It suggests that it’s not just about misrepresentation, but also about stolen identities and culture. Saunders later surmises this message when he states: ‘When we got a camera, our view of the world became important’. Saunders himself was instrumental in a lot of the changes within the Australian film industry that opened up more opportunities for
Indigenous peoples to get a camera and record their world views for others, mainly Indigenous communities, to engage with. His role within the AFC’s Indigenous Branch helped to assist the promotion of self-produced media works by Indigenous creatives, and why his words are a poignant introduction to a sample of *Blak Wave* Indigenous media producers that continue the political and personal narrative of Indigenous self-determination in the next exhibit.

*Blak Wave*, therefore, is not just the label of the second exhibit in the triptych, but also a signifier of the group of Indigenous creatives that arose from the policy and cultural shifts Saunders refers to in *Strangers with Cameras*. As stated above, this exhibit hears from five key film and television producers, each one speaking about their craft, which is always inextricably connected to their Indigenous background and a way of exploring their Indigenous heritage and identity. Each dialogue segment with Perkins, Thornton, Cole, Johnson and Sen, move through their thoughts on the history of Indigenous representation. However, where Saunders comes across with a sense of objective authority in the previous exhibit, these subjects come from a much more personal perspective, drawing on their own memories of how they engaged with media when they were young. For instance, Perkins notes the lack of Indigenous representation in mainstream media in her childhood, not being able to identify with the images she saw. Another theme running through these stories is the desire to create something culturally specific and reflective of their Aboriginality, whether this be to challenge their Indigenous audiences (Thornton) or the preconceived notions and stereotypes of their people (Johnson). What is fundamental to these dialogues is that both the exhibit and the subject’s motivation to produce their work is to ensure that the Indigenous stories are told by Indigenous people.

Similarly, the final exhibit, aptly titled *The Subject Speaks Back*, considers the cultural issues in the careers of Indigenous performers. The layout of this exhibit is similar to *Blak Wave* utilising video segments with the four actors mentioned above projected onto a wall for viewing. The difference between these two exhibits is through the visitor’s physical interaction with the screen where they are able to choose which segment they wish to watch via a touch screen placed to the side of an ottoman bench seat, rather than the looped video projection found in the *Blak Wave* alcove. A short description of both the exhibit and some biographical information of each subject greets the visitor as they choose a segment. Each segment with either Lewis, Foley, Maza or Pedersen runs for between four to six minutes each with the subject seated similarly to the those in the previous exhibit—mainly against a black background, framed right of screen, with examples from their body of work either to the top left above them or cut in between their seated shots. There is a subtle, but interesting, difference with how their work is shown next to them. Rather than being displayed on a cinema screen like in *Blak Wave* dialogues, they are more ethereally placed as if recalling a memory; the act of remembering is visualised and reinforced (in Figure 2).

Once again the message of the narrative is clear throughout each segment and personalised through the way it is discussed by each actor. Both Lewis and Pedersen speak of the conflicts they have found as Indigenous actors working in the mainstream with non-Indigenous producers. Lewis recounts some of his early work, where he felt the clash between his Aboriginal culture and identity, and his life as an actor. He notes a discussion he had with Fred Schepsi when
making *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) about what would happen if his family saw him shot on screen. He says ‘they will cry’—an acknowledgment of their cultural difference. Pedersen discusses his shift to directing after a prolific career in television and film, stating he is ‘sick of being a hired gun’ and ‘wants to be the one to say something’. Similarly, Maza refers to this idea when she speaks of the importance for Indigenous stories to be told with integrity and this is one of reasons why she enjoys acting in stories told by Indigenous filmmakers. Foley, however, also points out how he felt about his role in *A Country Practice* (1981-1993), which was one of his most significant roles. Before and after he makes this point, scenes from the program are shown, in which Foley’s character, Steve, talks about the problems facing Aboriginal communities with other non-Indigenous characters, such as lack of medical assistance, poor living conditions and land rights issues. These dialogues all connect to a theme acknowledged in different ways throughout each segment—the difference between performing in works that are produced by non-Indigenous creatives as opposed to those by Indigenous producers. This emphasis here falls not simply on the cross-cultural collaborative media works to facilitate conciliation, but to communicate how integral self-produced Indigenous works are for the recuperation of Aboriginal identity and more productive representations.

**Cinematic visions and cross-cultural dialogue**

Throughout the narrative of the three exhibits, a message of the need for Indigenous ownership and control over Indigenous stories in media productions of all types is clear. However, it is the way in which this narrative is expressed, through video dialogues with Aboriginal media producers and accompanied by other multimedia elements, that also embodies this message. This recalls what Mieke Bal (2006: 72) has referred to as the ‘cinematic vision’ of exhibition. The aesthetics of multimedia (video, film, still image, interactivity) throughout the exhibits also tells us something about how the message is being delivered and hopefully engaged with in a cross-cultural context; where the affective potential of the exhibits is established. These exhibits, therefore, take on a kind of cinematic structure through their placement and design, incorporating visual aesthetics and story structures more commonly understood in filmic terms—framing, *mise-en-scène*, lighting and movement. What emerges from this use of film language, particularly the use of facial close-ups in the creation of a shared gaze, is affect contagion, where certain affects are transmitted from body to body (Gibbs 2010) or from object to body (Byrne 2013). In the case of *Screen Worlds* Indigenous multimedia displays, body, object and message come together in the transference of affective sensations registered through the body of the visitor.

Immediately, ‘Dreaming in Colour’ reverses the historic lack of Indigenous representation in media by not only countering preconceived understandings of Indigenous culture, but by the way in which each exhibit incorporates both moving and still photography. As a result, the use of multimedia embodies the exhibits’ narrative, shifting away from being purely didactic or representational to an encounter with affective potential. This begins with *Strangers with Cameras* use of still images that frame its two small screens. While a number of these images are stills reflecting earlier Aboriginal representations in film and television, there is one quite striking image that stands out, which is illustrated in Figure 1. Situated high at the back of the exhibit is an image framed in a close up of an Indigenous man and woman looking out towards the visitor. They are holding each other, their faces reading like a mixture of both strength and vulnerability; a kind of metaphor for the self-determination and resilience of Aboriginal people through the many decades of racist representations. Their facial expressions and the feelings behind them are familiar and are transferred to us through their gaze, so we ‘converge emotionally’ (Gibbs 2010: 186). Their message is felt, creating a dialogue between Indigenous subject and visitor that attempts to remediate ‘narratives of heritage’ (Waterton 2014: 824), specifically the shared Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian heritage.

The recognition of human facial expressions is an integral element for the transference of affects or affect contagion. Anita Gibbs’ (2010: 186) concept of mimetic communication, of which affect contagion is embedded, provides a basis for how these images, such as this one, can engage visitors in the narrative’s message. She suggests that mimetic communication is
evident in facialisations (among others bodily displays—vocalisations, posture and movement) that synchronise with those of others and are felt similarly. Specifically, the ‘facial expression’s activation of a mimetic impulse in response to the facial expression of observers, tending then to elicit the same affect for them’ (Gibbs 2010: 191). When looking at the use of the close-up of the Indigenous face as a curatorial intervention in ‘Dreaming in Colour’ then, its purpose provokes affective engagement between the subject and visitor through the recognition of their feelings in the self.

This idea is continued in the other video in the exhibit depicting a reel of still photographs, firstly shown without the names of their Indigenous subjects, then repeating the image reel with the subjects’ names shown. The video’s aim is to illustrate how individual and collective Indigenous identities were not seen as important enough in early representations to require their names be attached. All of these images engage with something larger than what they may initially appear to, not just on an intellectual level, but also on a more affective one. Witcomb (2007: 40) writes of Bunjilaka’s previous Koorie Voices photographic display, ‘as one walks from photo to photo, looking up, down, and across the rows of photographs, an occasional face responds to your gaze and becomes ‘alive’, engaging you in direct dialogue’. The response to the Strangers with Cameras photos has a similar impact, even if they are significantly fewer in number than the display at Bunjilaka, as the subject and visitor connect to one another through the gaze. These images act as embodied memory of Indigenous heritage—a reminder of a past where Indigenous people were silenced, unnamed and without agency. However, its inclusion in the exhibit by Indigenous curators also works to reclaim their agency. These subjects are no longer nameless objects of anthropological interest, but finally humanised through reinterpretation.

In Blak Wave and The Subject Speaks Back, the framing is simple in its design, the subjects mainly in close up with a black background behind them, illustrated in Figure 3. This encourages the visitor to focus on the vocalisation and faces of the subjects, recognising that it is the Indigenous voice that is being heard and engaged with. Much like Witcomb’s (2007: 40) analysis of multimedia installations at Bunjilaka, the use of the screen in this way invites the visitor through the gaze of the subject into a dialogue, provoking a connection with its conciliatory and political message. This has the greatest impact in the segments with Thornton and Lewis, who both look through the camera lens, directly addressing the visitor and engaging them in a shared gaze. I lament somewhat that not all of the subjects in these exhibits were directed to do so, however. Nonetheless, as Lewis in particular recalls the beginning of his career, leaving his family for the first time and relating the conflict he felt between his Aboriginal culture and the strange world of filmmaking, there is a feeling established that we recognise in his expression and vocal intonation, They are reflective of the conflict and worry he felt while he recalls these memories.

These exhibits challenge pre-conceived colonial notions of Indigenous culture by creating an awareness of not only the work of Indigenous creatives, but also how their Aboriginal identities have been affected by their work. All this is conveyed through the use of the close up, which allows the visitor a close reading of Indigenous people’s faces, thus facilitating human-to-human engagement. The cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects, as Phillip Schorch (2014: 85) suggests, cannot develop ‘between totalized collective entities but
only an interpersonal dialogue among cultural human beings’. Productive dialogue amongst diverse peoples, or the renegotiation of imaginary constructs, happens at the level of the cultural human being and the sharing of personal narratives. These narratives are not only embodied through words, but also through bodily displays of emotion, such as facial expressions, that can develop opportunities for more empathetic understandings of one another.

**Conclusion**

At the time of this research, ACMI are in early discussions and planning for the reinterpretation of the *Screen Worlds* exhibition, which may also mean an update for the Indigenous content. An issue that has been acknowledged by ACMI through their visitor feedback mechanisms is that the simpler aesthetic of these exhibits stands apart from the rest of *Screen Worlds* technological vibrancy and interactivity (Simondson 2015, pers. comm., 11 May). While the Indigenous content is integrated through the Australian media story, the minimalist interpretative design contrasts to the high-energy colour of the rest of the exhibition, as suggested in Figure 4. This could be perceived as a privileging of the non-Indigenous content, as the minimalism is unlikely to draw the visitor’s eye to the important content presented within these three exhibits. However, I would argue that a minimalist interpretation heightens the emphasis on the narrative’s message embodied in the facial close-ups and shared gazed, signaling its importance through eschewing the distraction of overt light and sound.

What this process of ACMI’s cross-cultural collaboration also suggests is the need for further discussion and research on how the key messages of exhibits like those in *Screen Worlds* engage and are received by audiences, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. At present, there is a clear message present throughout the ‘Dreaming in Colour’ exhibits, one that is both conciliatory, while also asserting the shift to a more self-determined and empowered Indigenous representation and identity. This reiterates the moving image museum’s capacity for affective visitor engagement via their multimedia formats and use of film language aesthetics, encouraging cross-cultural cultural dialogue and transformative experiences.

**Acknowledgements**

Thank you to Helen Simondson from the Australian Centre for the Moving Images for assisting with the research on *Screen World’s* cross-cultural collaborative process.
References


