Aboriginal culture can more easily be disregarded while it remains marginalised. Yet when it moves into the mainstream it is often accused of ‘selling out’. STEPHEN MUECKE argues that the dichotomy is a misleading one.

"Hey, listen you guys, we’ve got a good idea. How about you and me try and get down and come back to where we started from, stand on an equal footing?"

Mandawuy Yunupingu

Mandawuy Yunupingu is Australian of the Year. He led the Aboriginal rock band Yothu Yindi from NE Arnhem Land in the far north of Australia to a position where, in 1991, their Treaty single hit the top ten. But let’s go back to an earlier video clip whose title describes this process: Into the Mainstream. Over the past few years there has been a centralisation of the (Aboriginal) margin going on, and it calls for new political strategies in cultural policies—the arena where meanings are made.

Yunupingu is a man with a mission: university educated, but from a community which has always been relatively isolated from the massive depredations that 200 years of colonisation have wreaked upon Aboriginal cultures. He wants to bring together the ‘white-fella’ (balanda) and the Aboriginal (Yolngu, his tribal group). His version of this political/cultural consensus is supported by a number of intersecting discourses, as the images and lyrics in the video clip show.

Without seeing it here and now, you’ll have to take it on trust that there are three stories being told here. One is about pan-Aboriginality, a new concept in a land where traditionally about a million people used to live in relative isolation, without any unifying political structure, but with some cultural continuities. Even as more and more Aboriginal people are participating ‘in the mainstream’, among them there are still conflicts and differences. The struggle is hard against entrenched patterns of discrimination, yet the stakes are high: there is a whole ‘Aboriginal industry’ tied in with the tourist industry, knowledges (museums, anthropology), and the delivery of welfare and other social services.

The images of Aboriginal art in the clip inscribe this pan-Aboriginality: images from the Kimberleys (to the west of Yirrkala, where they are singing from), of Wandjinas, the haloed mouthless heads, gods of the rain, flip over to the now famous ‘dot’ style of painting from Central Australia, and the more traditional bark paintings from Yothu Yindi’s own country. This cultural cut ‘n’ mix says more about the contemporary Aboriginal situation than traditional practices—by which I mean that it says more about the way art entrepreneurship and tourism ‘appropriates’ traditional designs as a way of promoting the whole country, even though the designs have very specific reference in the home ‘countries’.

The group seems to have paid more attention to musical copyright than that relating to the images in the clip. Yunupingu said in an interview:

We had to draw on copyright for the traditional sections so that we weren’t being sell-outs to our own culture. This requires us to go down and sit with our elders and solve the problem.

The producers of the clip, Axolotl, had the images cleared for use by the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council.

The second story is about consensus, building bridges, a metaphor much used in the Christianisation process of Aborigines. It is also
the name of a recent album on which blacks and whites play together. Christianity, with a dash of liberation theology, is perhaps more important than radical politics in the construction of pan-Aboriginality because of a common missionary background in most cases, and an ability to transform and adapt Christian narrative and ritual to Aboriginal ways. "Making money can be one thing, building bridges can be another," they sing in another song.

The last story is about achievement, economic and cultural. They want to "strike or penetrate the music industry in Australia, and the world for that matter" at the same time as delivering a moral message about "living together, learning together" as the kids are shown getting down and dancing at a bush concert. Up there on the stage is their teacher from the Both Ways School (in Yirrkala, Yunupingu is headmaster), and the close-ups on their faces say one thing: this is the future of Aboriginality, and "future" has suddenly become an indigenous buzzword: "We want to give them encouragement, a sense of direction, to feel proud of their Yolngu culture."

Other Aboriginal groups like No Fixed Ad-

dress, Coloured Stone and Scrap Metal have been around longer and have not had as much exposure as Yothu Yindi. In fact, it's still very hard for Aboriginal groups to get on mainstream TV, just as it's very hard to find an Aboriginal model or air stewardess—and you don't find tourist brochures selling tropical paradises with the charms of the local women. As suss as they are, these stereotypes are still off-limits for Aboriginal people. The marketing manager says the product just won't sell, so we continue to hear stories about Aborigines based on primitivism, repression/liberation, or ghetto failure. So while some sympathetic white kids sing ill-conceived songs about their guilt, Yothu Yindi has come along with a quite shockingly assertive statement about really being quite normal and OK.

Yunupingu, an enthusiast for the metaphor, says that the musical style comes of cleaning the jungle in terms of bringing about a different kind of music which involves two music dynamics, one that is forty, sixty, eighty thousand years old and one that is contemporar-

y music.

He missed his chance here to link hands with
the African roots of Rock—even though the group was keen to meet other indigenous people when they were in North America. His rhetorical point is simpler: we are sovereign in our own country, but we can play your musical game too. And they do; the didjeridoo provides a slow cycling bass, sometimes squawking when voice is added to lip vibration, and a more punctuated rhythm is in the clicking of the bilma, clapsticks. The one blocks the bass area, while the other people demonstrated in Sydney against 200 years with Aboriginal traditions—a compromise that.

This is quite a different matter from stylistic theft, the use of boundaries, by stylistic quotation. This is quite

The complex rhetoric of Yothu Yindi's video clip leads me to posit a kind of 'affirmative appropriation'—sometimes called fusion—for their musical style. 'Affirmative appropriation' can also be taken as a metaphor for cultural politics, according to which one can assume that it is 'alright' to dialogue respectfully across cultural boundaries, by stylistic quotation. This is quite a different matter from stylistic theft, the use of designs without appropriate copyright clearance. And it also causes one to reconsider the usefulness of the spatial metaphor of centre and margin for cultural politics.

Aboriginal teachers always say: "Follow the tracks of your mother; don't stray". And mothers might say to their children: "Don't ask too many questions, don't be garrulous: watch and listen". This is a politics of the example, as opposed to a politics of critique. Talking about European unification recently, French philosopher Jacques Derrida had occasion to develop this notion of the exemplary. In *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, Michael Naas, his translator, introduces Derrida's essay by saying the question of the example is the question of politics. Giving priority to the rhetorical conditions of the example enables us to examine the "possibility of beginning not with a politics of which we would then give examples, but with examples out of which we might invent a politics". And, indeed, it is hard to imagine a political speech which did not work towards a generality on the basis of specificities; it is through giving examples that the politician attempts to forge identity and identification. The evocation of 'nation'—or, indeed, 'republic' in the current context—becomes a rhetorical divide whereby new identities can be mobilised.

Under what heading, Derrida asks, can one begin to think about political discourses to do with national and supranational sovereignty and identity? Especially when names of individual nations like France and Spain are being subsumed under the broader heading of Europe? Could the provisional heading for this project be the postnational, indicating a provisional reconstruction towards nationhood which investigates its own rhetorical tactics?

Derrida's own examples refer to Europe and its Others, since it is always a question of relations—gazing over borders—when it comes to the definition of nation. Europe developed as Europe because it defines non-Europe as Other. Now, as European nations disintegrate and reform amid a resurgent racism—towards Africans (in France and Italy), and Gypsies and Jews (in Germany and central Europe)—non-Europeans especially are an irritating presence for the radical conservatives like Le Pen in southern France, the neo-Nazis in Germany, and those in the UK who still consider the continent to be full of foreigners. Similarly, current uses of 'Australia' tend to expose our versions of the heart of darkness.

Rejecting both the complete unification and the fragmentation of Europe, Derrida calls for a renewal of Enlightenment values and liberal democracy. While Derrida continues to see Enlightenment values as imbued with Eurocentric 
chaunism, he now puts the case, in reflecting on Europe, for finding a transformed Enlightenment ethic. “Is it not necessary,” he asks, “to have the courage and lucidity for a new critique of the new effects of capital...?” He is careful to point out that he has both resisted the “frightening totalitarian dogmatism” of Marxism and will resist neocapitalist exploitation in the realignment of the new world order.

Paradoxically, Derrida helps us forget about Europe as an exemplary philosophical locus, its history standing as an example to the others. Historically, so far, neither Asia as a region nor Australia as a nation has really counted on a world stage. This amnesia would coincide with all the work of remembering the Aboriginal holocaust. The ‘hidden history’ is the familiar heading for this recuperative work, but the recovery of lost history can also be coupled to a politics of exemplification. The best known international example from Australia is Sally Morgan’s My Place, a bildungsroman of Aboriginal identity which, while it has been criticised as abandoning an earlier politics of the ‘problem’, precisely introduces a politics of the personal example, thereby contributing to an acceptable ‘technology of the self’ for Aboriginal peoples’ self-definition in Australian history.

Another example: the work of Walmajarri designer Jimmy Pike makes for a good case study in the shifting relations of Aboriginal cultures, government agencies, and private enterprises like galleries and art entrepreneurs. To put it in a kind of narrative, Jimmy Pike would have had a number of options when he was paroled out of Fremantle Jail in 1983. He could have gone back to drinking in the fringe camps of Fitzroy Crossing, but that would have meant breaking parole and further ‘corrective’ therapy, then Pike would never have got to the W AIT (now Curtin University).

If the Department of Corrections hadn’t originally conceived of art classes as some spirit of ‘corrective’ therapy, then Pike would never have met Culley and Wroth, nor would he have necessarily had any idea that art provided a way out and a way to respectability and now fame. Like many other Aboriginal people he found that art, the exploitation of his culture’s resources, was a way of recasting one’s status and finding a way out of the fringe camps and into the ‘middle class’.

Yet, having chosen art as the only viable way of rehabilitation, Pike could still have taken a number of routes:

1) He could have chosen a kind of welfare/preservation model for his work: seeking grants through the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council or other sponsoring bodies, and doing his work for sale or for collection and preservation in museums and galleries. Under this model his work as a traditional man would tend to be subsumed under a kind of past-tense cultural framing: ‘primitive’, ‘timeless’, ‘natural’ and so on.

2) Another way would have been to opt for a ‘community arts’ model, a model which would also depend on government money to set up workshops for the production of objects for local sale within the Aboriginal community or to tourists. Pike might then have become a designer for silk screening on T-shirts or have done paintings for direct sale. He could have combined this work with option (1). But I don’t think this option was available to him, or it is not yet available. Prior to the time spent in jail, his life around Fitzroy Crossing was not spent in ways that earned him any great respect in the Aboriginal community. To be fully a part of it, to participate in meetings and ceremonies, he would have had to be sober like the Christian Aborigines who use the church and their own cultural organisations to consolidate a delicately surviving group of cultures.

3) The third option was, in any case, virtually in place when he went back to the Great Sandy Desert on parole. Culley and Wroth were starting things moving to set up Desert Designs with Pike’s work as the first major design story. Later on, when the Byers Company in Sydney took up the manufacturing contract, the designs were being sold alongside the products which also bear his designs. For the Desert Designs company there is a kind of balancing act between the notion of Jimmy Pike the artist—for whom they sometimes feel compelled to do a romantic promotion of the artist as ‘genius/Aboriginal/isolated in the desert’—and the Jimmy Pike products which the big stores like Grace Brothers market alongside Jenny Kee, Weiss and Ken Done.

The third option was the one which fitted in best with Pike’s situation; the necessity for rehabilitation, his isolation from his own community, his ‘bourgeoisification’ and the desire for a regular income. Under these conditions he has become precisely the sort of Aboriginal private business promoted by Mick Miller in his report for the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations in 1985, sent around in videotape versions to Aboriginal communities. Miller deplored the fact that in the cities Aboriginal people seem to be only employed by government or their own organisations. He states that the private sector
employs 75% of the workforce, and that Aboriginal people should not only be part of that 75%, but they should also be setting up businesses and thus creating money and employment in their own communities and breaking down somewhat the welfare provisions which keep many rural communities going. Jimmy Pike is thus the ideal representative for this model. As a kind of entrepreneur in his own culture, he has succeeded in transposing the designs from his traditional past in the Great Sandy Desert to media suitable for fashion prints and has thus escaped the confines of museums of the 'timeless dreamtime' and government grants, and has opened up the possibility for further employment of his own people in an industry which need not necessarily belong only to white people and their ideas.

In quite a different sense the use of Aboriginal design in fashion is close to the traditional idea of 'body painting'. Providing the designs are 'public' and not 'secret/sacred', the idea of body decoration through fashion may be closer to Aboriginal ideas than framing paintings and 'capturing' them for the museum and gallery market. The concept of body decoration spans both Aboriginal and European cultures; both cultures could be seen to have this common concern to transform the image of our bodies and in the process make them relate to our country, especially with a range of line and colour which is quintessentially Australian at a time when nationalism is running high and nationalist discourses are turning, as always, to 'the land' to look for a 'source'.

Jimmy Pike's success depends in part on these nationalist formations, but it is also the case that he has created a kind of 'writing'—defined broadly as cultural meaning—which is not destined to be fixed in books or museums. Rather, it penetrates the mobile social spaces of the whole of Australian society by being carried around, nomadically, on people's bodies. It becomes, therefore, an art, of everyday life, a 'smart' dress or shirt for the suburban dweller, something for the beach or the Kakadu Klub. There is thus a subtle diffusion of Aboriginality through the social spaces of the metropolis rather than the ghettoisation of Aboriginality and Cultural Studies of NSW Press, 1992). Becoming mainstream can involve escaping the cultural prisons which are always lurking in the background.'