Dreamtime

Ian McLean
University of Wollongong, imclean@uow.edu.au

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On the 13th December 2008 the Weekend Australian Review reported the mysterious ‘vanishing’ of the artist Spider Kalbybidi. A senior Anangu (Western Desert) law man, ‘it was widely believed that he could project himself across vast distances, that he could make himself invisible and see deep into the future and past.’ One night, shortly after his disappearance, three elders each had the same dream in which the ancestral Dreamtime figure Marumateye took Spider back to the spirit world. It later transpired that a law or Dreamtime painting he had made was the catalyst for Marumateye’s visit. While the artist’s body has never been found, no doubt an autopsy by a Western trained doctor would provide a very different diagnosis in which space and time are more Euclidean and homogenous.

No two cultures seem so different as those of Aboriginal Australia and the post-industrial Western world. Their incongruity would seem fundamental, as their conceptions of space and time – the axes by which the world is known and measured – are so different. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Aboriginal idea of Dreamtime – which is a literal translation of the Anangu word tjukurrpa. Even those who know next to nothing about the Dreamtime can feel in its metaphoric allusions the profound difference between it and the ‘real’ time we ordinary people supposedly inhabit. This sense of difference needs to be resisted, especially if we wish to understand Aboriginal conceptions of time. Well-meaning critics insist on the incommensurability between Aboriginal and Western cosmologies, believing that this will protect and preserve Aboriginal difference and, with it, the richness and mystery of Aboriginal culture. However such belief not only forgets the essential hybridity of all cultural formations, it is also paternalistic and blind to the policing function of its paternalism, which aims to preserve its own dominance. This policing is ideologically driven, the aim being to alienate Aboriginal thought from the modern world we all live in.

To begin with, there is nothing arcane or archaic, mysterious or mythical about Aboriginal conceptions of time. Anangu I have known readily understand differences between past, present and future. The cycles of the day, month and year are an implicit part of Anangu life. So too are the different ages of mankind, from conception to death and the various stages in-between. This consciousness of the cycles of life and the universe are embedded in Aboriginal metaphysics – after all, their livelihoods as hunters over the millennia depended on a heightened and accurate sense of these temporal rhythms. If modern post-industrial life has dulled our sense of such temporal rhythms, they are nevertheless imprinted in our cultural history and, indeed, in all cultural histories. Time is one of the things that physicists admit they know least about, but it is an elemental cosmological force, and its manifestations in this corner of the universe have shaped all life and cultural expression on planet earth.

However, there is no denying that there is also another dimension to the way Aborigines live in time that is foreign to the modern Western experience – unless you happen to be a theoretical physicist or science fiction writer. It is as if the flat duration of everyday secular time is merely one face or dimension of a more deeply set phenomenon. The Aboriginal sensitivity to cosmological forces is well known. They seemingly inhabit the substance of the cosmos, as if inside its elemental currents of space and time or, more accurately, its spacetime continuum (Einstein showed that space and time are indivisible). These elemental currents are the lifeblood of Aboriginal spirituality and spoken of in a literal sense. Everyday life and its duration are never experienced autonomously, as we Western moderns seem to, but in conjunction with spirits who move back and forth through time and space as if networked into the structure of the cosmos. This spirit world, like the wind to which it is often compared, comes from the tjukurrpa and keeps everything energised. When Anangu feel tired it is primarily because their spirit is tired. The spirit world is far more powerful than the physical world as it is the gateway to tjukurrpa. Like a time machine or particles in the micro-world of quantum physics, it can occupy simultaneous positions in spacetime.
Thus an essential feature of tjukurrpa is its simultaneity and ever-presentness, which is why scholars prefer the term Dreaming to Dreamtime. The latter seems too much like a particular period of time – akin to the six days in which God created the world – whereas Dreaming evokes a more eternal timeless quality that better captures the Aboriginal conception. However, this prejudice against the term Dreamtime reflects the dominance of periodisation in modern Western thought. Dreamtime is a good translation because it acknowledges the fundamental temporality of the concept, which is akin to the spacetime of actual dreaming when asleep. When Aborigines dream they believe their spirit – which is an incarnation of Dreaming – temporarily leaves their body, as if the night is down time for the spirit, the time when it returns home. Images, events, stories and voices perceived during a dream – during this dream time – relate to the spirit world. What happens in a dream has real consequences. If one is hurt in a dream then sickness might result. Dreams are also the way in which tjukurrpa is often updated, providing the means for the new, say a recent massacre, a car crash, a drought, to be folded into the continuum of tjukurrpa. New song and dance narratives are often revealed in dreams, as when Rover Thomas “found” the Kurirr Kurirr dance cycle in 1975. This important revelation is about the spirit of an old woman in which the Rainbow Serpent figures prominently – the woman was injured in a car crash at an overflowing creek in the aftermath of Cyclone Tracey and later died in the aeroplane taking her to Perth. In other words, Dreamtime is not a mythical past but the means of explaining the present in terms of its continuity with all that has passed and is. This way of thinking is not unfamiliar to the post-industrial West, as its own Christian origins thought in very similar terms. The idea of an eternally present God is not too distant from the idea of the eternally present Dreaming ancestors. Not surprisingly, then, Aborigines have as seamlessly folded Christian beliefs into tjukurrpa as they have other aspects of modernity and post-contact history. However, even Christianity has not been able to resist the ruthless rationalism that governs the main game of Western modernity.
Likewise, if the Aboriginal inhabitation of spacetime gives them an uncanny ability to see where things have been and will go, it is a prescience that the modern Western world cannot countenance. This lack or disbelief derives from an old habit of thought that thinks in terms of negation and discontinuity. By and large, Western modernity frames its understanding of the world in terms of discontinuities between space and time, and between past, present and future. The Aboriginal world is othered not just because of the ideological imperatives of colonial conquest but also because of the ideological imperatives of Western modernity to break with the past, including its own past. This way of conceiving time is called ‘history’ or ‘historical materialism’.

This ‘history’ does three things with time. First, it demarcates it into mutually exclusive homogenous periods. There is nothing unusual in this. Anangu divide the history of Papunya Tula into ‘Bardon time’, ‘Dick Kimber time’, John Kean time’ etc. Second, ‘history’ creates a linear sequential relationship between these times, so that there is no going back. Aborigines also know they cannot go back to the ‘old times’. In this respect time is irreversible. Third, ‘history’ is teleological. It either steers by an imagined future or makes the present a template with which to judge the past. In this respect it is a way of forgetting or leaving behind. The only things remembered are those that justify either the present or what the future is imagined to be. This mythical aspect of ‘history’ creates a linear redemptive time with which, as Walter Benjamin said, the rulers can pat themselves on the back for being on the right side of history.

Aborigines are very aware of the discontinuities of the physical world, but they also acknowledge an essential and overarching continuum. History is not outside tjukurrpa. While not so goal-orientated, Aboriginal metaphysics is not without its teleological aspects. Moreover, the modern period is noted for its deep interest in the eternal present, simultaneity, continuum and other non-linear conceptions of spacetime and its relation to being. I have already mentioned modern physics and science fiction, but there are also seminal European artists such as Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, Breton, Klein and Richter, and philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin, Deleuze and Derrida. They too have sought to feel and know spacetime in the pressing and intimate way that Aborigines do. They even seem to believe, like Aborigines, that these forces shape their own individuality and identity, establishing direct immutable relationships between them and everything and everyone else in the world. For these modernist men, to inhabit the spacetime continuum was, as Emily Roehr said of Spider Kalbybidi’s paintings, to ‘look into the heart of life’.

1 As reported in Nicholas Rothwell, ‘In the shadow of modernity’, Weekend Australian Review, December 13–14, 2008, pp. 4–6.
2 Ibid.

Ian McLean lectures in art history at the University of Western Australia.

Alma Webou Kalaju (Jaladou) Left: Pinkalarta 2005, acrylic on canvas, 152 x 122 cm.
Right: Pinkalarta 2007, acrylic on linen, 122 x 122 cm. Opposite: Pinkalarta 2006, acrylic on linen, 180 x 119 cm.