

**petyarre** | **and moffatt**  
*'Looking from the Sky'* | LINNELL SECOMB

In 1930s Germany, Walter Benjamin, perceiving the disintegration of human connection in industrialised society and fearing the aesthetic and communal appeal of fascism in this alienated environment prophetically analysed the 'pile of debris ... grow[ing] skyward' created by this 'storm' of 'progress'.<sup>1</sup> For Benjamin, modernity's shock effect was transforming human life into an automaton existence deprived of sociality and communicable experience. Economism and mechanisation were eviscerating human feeling so that:

A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>2</sup>

This image of a vulnerable humanity exposed, beneath an eternal sky, to the catastrophe of modernity returns, half a world away and several lifetimes later, in another guise in Australian Indigenous artist Tracey Moffatt's photo series *Up in the Sky*.<sup>3</sup> Depicting, in quasi-documentary style, a mixed-race, outback community devastated by poverty and racism, these photo-images evoke again 'tiny, fragile human' lives buffeted by 'destructive torrents and explosions'. Here, however, the destruction is wrought by colonialism, racism and dispossession; yet this other world beneath clouds has nevertheless also been reduced to debris created by the storm of progress.

Moffatt's *Up in the Sky* series draws attention to the relation between sky and earth, through the content and camera angles of the images. Similarly, Kathleen Petyarre's Central Desert acrylic dot painting evokes this relation representing country and Dreaming from a celestial

perspective—as she says ‘looking from the sky’.<sup>4</sup> Yet here any association between these artists seems to end with the urban artist refusing to engage Aboriginal tradition and the desert artist focused on Dreaming, country and heritage. However, a further connection between these disparate works may also be discerned as each, in differing ways, transforms our conventional perceptions of space and time. Reading these images in relation to Walter Benjamin’s concepts of the auratic and of messianic time, I suggest that each restructures dimension and duration putting in question the (post)modern calibrations of our space/time experience. This paper, then, stages an engagement between these artists’ works and Benjamin’s concepts exploring the variations and modifications of the spatial and the temporal that hybrid cross-cultural exchanges require and facilitate.

— SPACE

If we understand the world beneath clouds as everyday earthly life, we may conceive its opposite as the celestial world up in the sky. Kathleen Petyarre’s Central Desert dot painting however confounds this distinction, depicting the sacred within the red earth of her homeland. Many commentators represent her work as both a mapping of territory—of sand, walking tracks, waterholes and ceremonial sites—and at the same time as an allusion to the Dreaming of the Mountain Devil Lizard of which she is custodian. Her work demonstrates the intimate association of sand and ceremony, of everyday life and Dreaming experience.

Petyarre describes the perspective in her ‘new style’ of painting as an attempt to capture the experience of ‘looking from the sky’: it evokes a sensation, she says, of ‘travelling in a light plane, like it’s moving, travelling, looking down’. This celestial perspective may recall the Western omniscient ‘view from nowhere’ but should not be conflated with it, for as Petyarre explains: ‘It’s still body painting, still ceremony, even looking from the sky, [it is] still dancing ... My story is still going, even with the new style.’<sup>5</sup> While the Western god’s-eye-view claims universalism, Petyarre’s work insists on a specificity related to land, culture, and her particular dreaming stories handed down from earlier generations. Her new ‘looking from the sky’ style reflects not a universal imaginary but her Dreaming story, expressed in and as painting, dancing and ceremony.

Nonetheless, again perplexing any easy dichotomy, Petyarre’s work is also imbued with this Western universalising view-from-nowhere. In its reception in the galleries and museums of Adelaide and New York, Petyarre’s particular aerial perspective is rearticulated and reimagined through this Western omniscient lens. Indeed, Christine Nicholls attests to Petyarre’s attunement to the Western art market and to her ‘highly developed cross-cultural facility and skills’, which produces an aesthetics that reaches beyond ritual function to create international exhibition and exchange value.<sup>6</sup> It thereby already makes itself available to interpretation through a Western panoptic universalism.

Petyarre's work, then, not only creates an intimacy between the sacred and quotidian but also between the specificity of her aerial view of her Dreaming country and the universalising orientation associated with a Western looking-from-the-sky perspective. It thereby confounds any simple distinction between a 'traditional' Indigenous art and a global (post)modern aesthetic that subsumes all within its appropriating discourses. Petyarre's work defies any reduction to either an expression of some essential 'authentic' Aboriginal culture and heritage or a capitulation to the demands and tastes of the international art market. Instead, Petyarre's work participates in dual cultures and is informed by a double heritage that accounts, in part, for its hybrid aesthetic complexity.

Paul Gilroy identifies a similar 'doubleness' within Black Atlantic music. Gilroy is wary of a politics of Black exceptionalism that insists on the continuation of a pristine Africanist culture because of its conservative, nationalist and essentialist implications. But he is equally cautious about the postmodern critique of that essentialism insofar as it overlooks the realities of racism and the lived experience of racialised identity and community.<sup>7</sup> He argues instead that the various Black Atlantic musics draw on a diversity of traditions including African influences, slave experiences and developments within modernity to create an identity that 'can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language games'.<sup>8</sup> For Gilroy, these divergent influences create a 'doubleness' in cultural productions that is evident in the tensions between 'the same and the other or the traditional and the modern': a doubleness that is uniquely situated 'in an expanded West but not completely of it'.<sup>9</sup>

Petyarre's work enacts this 'doubleness' by preserving and expressing aspects of Indigenous culture while also integrating the techniques and sensibilities of the West. As a consequence the Dreaming is expressed within the marketable commodity; the specificity of home-country is articulated with a Western totalising transcendental. This employment of dual or disparate elements is not unrelated to what Ian North identifies as Petyarre's religious pragmatism.<sup>10</sup> North draws on Walter Benjamin's concept of the auratic to suggest that Petyarre combines Dreaming stories with fine-art assessments of marketable beauty, creating an auratic quality. North writes:

The work has the aura created by its beauty and the second-order aura of its religious prestige ... [this] create[s] the effect of an artwork looking back at the viewer from a quasi 'ceremonial', awe-inspiring distance, even as it fills our close attention.<sup>11</sup>

In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (that essay which has itself, ironically, achieved a cultic status) Benjamin describes the destruction of the auratic effect of traditional and cultic art through the technologies of mechanical reproduction, photography and film. Traditionally, artworks attain authenticity through their unique

positioning in space and time but reproduction enables a mass distribution that undermines this uniqueness and its associated aura.<sup>12</sup> The auratic effect, the uniqueness and authenticity of the work, and the esoteric qualities of traditional and cultic art create a sense of distance which Benjamin likens to the sensation of inapproachability in our perception of 'natural' phenomena:

We define the aura ... as the unique phenomena of a distance, however close it [an object] may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.<sup>13</sup>

This reverential distancing of auratic art is associated with a certain mode of perception that is transformed through the art reproduction technologies. Benjamin contends that sense perception is historically organised and determined and suggests that 'changes in the medium of contemporary perception can be comprehended as decay of the aura'.<sup>14</sup> The decay of aura results from the accessibility associated with mass reproduction and distribution of traditional art and also through the technologies of photography and film. Film audiences, no longer awe-struck, engage with and critique film work. Reverential contemplation of auratic art is replaced by a casual, even distracted, reception and evaluation of the work.<sup>15</sup>

Petyarre's acrylic on canvas painting may be interpreted as a remobilisation of this auratic quality. Her work puts the auratic into effect not only through its sacred connections and its fine-art aesthetics but also through an obverse gesture in which it refuses to reveal the Dreaming stories. This simultaneous association with the spiritual and camouflage of sacred knowledges, stories and meanings only accentuates the auratic sensibility of the work. The artwork evokes while also, in Christine Nicholls's words, 'protecting from the predatory gaze' the Dreaming stories.<sup>16</sup> This accentuation of the auratic effect through the repression or disguise of the sacred element corresponds with Benjamin's suggestion that exhibition or exposure is opposed to and destroys the auratic. The ritual element, he contends, must be kept hidden in order to retain its effects:

... cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden. Certain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cell; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on the ground.<sup>17</sup>

Petyarre's work evokes the Dreaming, though this element may be fully accessible only to initiates. Yet, for non-Indigenous audiences this ungraspable element only enhances the aura of the work. The ineffable is not rendered inoperative but resonates yet more deeply. Yet this reactivation of the auratic effect should not be understood as a regressive return to an

esoteric and elitist art form that excludes and alienates mass engagement. For as Benjamin acknowledges in 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' the auratic is also an effect that enriches communicable experience creating the world as a home. The demise of human interconnection, and a sense of destitution, accompanies its destruction. The loss of ritual, of festival days, of remembrance of prehistory, of correspondences, is also the loss of communicable affective life so that, as Benjamin writes, 'the earth revert[s] to a mere state of nature. No breath of prehistory surrounds it: there is no aura'.<sup>18</sup>

In this essay Benjamin acknowledges the positive aspects of the auratic and the devastation resulting from the 'decline of the aura'.<sup>19</sup> He defines the auratic here as the experience of our gaze returned by the inanimate world:

Experience of the aura ... rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.<sup>20</sup>

This returned gaze effect, however, does not create proximity but distance and is associated with the ceremonial and the inapproachable:

... the aura ... comprises the 'unique manifestation of a distance.' This designation has the advantage of clarifying the ceremonial character of the phenomena. The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image.<sup>21</sup>

Petyarre's work activates the auratic returned-gaze effect through its ritual associations as well as its captivating aesthetic resonances. It creates an entranced awe-struck contemplation—it maintains its unapproachable distance through its allusions to the ungraspable. Yet it also thereby deepens experience indicating a realm beyond the empirical and observable. By refusing to reveal itself, the indefinable in Petyarre's work avoids a reductive transformation into the information, data and quasi-scientific knowledges of our times. It enriches experience, communicates sensation, and reciprocates our gaze, without succumbing to a predatory objectifying observation. Yet while Petyarre's work may be read as an activation of the auratic, with both its positive and negative consequences, it may also be read, I contend, as going beyond or achieving something other than this auratic inapproachability. The remoteness of the auratic is not a literal extension or elongation of space but a metaphorical remove associated with a reverential reverie before the beautiful or ceremonial object. Petyarre's work achieves something closer to a literal reshaping of our perception of space.

Kathleen Petyarre's Dreaming painting disturbs the modern and postmodern Western ordering of numerically calibrated space. This rupturing is not limited to an auratic distancing of the proximate. It is also an interruption and a distortion of dimension through a

folding and unfolding, a collapsing and extension, of the conceptual within the materiality of space. While space is generally conceived as objective, numerically measurable, unchanging dimension, Petyarre's work uncovers or invents a mobility and qualitative variability of space. So sky and earth speak simultaneously through the work collapsing the celestial and terrestrial, the sacred and quotidian. Similarly, the work depicts the minutia of the grain of sand as it also expresses the expanses of land, territory, country and home, suggesting that the abstract concepts of home and place are constituted through engagement with the experience of the materiality of the grain of sand, scattering seeds, lizard track, dancing ground. Conceptual and material image complexly entwine, and so also does the near and far: the seeds and hailstones are also at once the vast space of home-country. Petyarre undermines the idea of space as external, physical, measurable, homogenous units by elaborating a relation between the matter or objects within space and the subjective, abstract concepts of home, land and belonging. Space and matter transform from objective entities into affectively rich experiences.

This diffusion or dispersion, this elongation and contraction, of space, recall Benjamin's assertion that human sense perception is historically determined and subject to transformation. Benjamin asserts that 'The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well'.<sup>22</sup> Changes in technology, for example, not only destroy auratic extension but may also modify our perception and experience of objects and movement. So Benjamin argues that the close-up and slow motion in film create a kind of unconscious optics equivalent to unconscious processes in the psyche:

With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones ... Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.<sup>23</sup>

While Benjamin identifies a change in perception enabled by new technologies of photography and film, I suggest that Petyarre's work indicates the cultural specificity of perception. Petyarre's painting hints at an experience of space foreign to the Western eye. This is not the expansion of space and extension of movement facilitated by filmic apparatus but rather a simultaneous gathering-in and dispersal of space through an assemblage and articulation of the near and far—of the country as a whole with and within the particular object—the sandstorm, scattering seed, rockhole, watercourse, Lizard Dreaming.

Petyarre 'looks from the sky' to create quasi-auratic work that is also a form of conceptual-materiality. This conceptual-materiality explodes calibrated space by concurrently evoking magnitude and minutia—the hailstone as the homeland. Additionally, her employment of the auratic reinvents dimensionality by making distant and enigmatic the everyday. In contrast, urban Indigenous artist Tracey Moffatt produces post-auratic photographs and film that instead distort temporality, making present what has already passed. In many respects then Petyarre's and Moffatt's works could be read dichotomously: while Petyarre engages ancestral Dreamings, utilises a Central Desert dot-painting style, and has been associated with a high art aesthetics, Moffatt is unwilling to draw on traditional Aboriginal stories, uses photography and film, and draws on Western 'trash and classical' popular and 'high-culture' influences.<sup>24</sup> Yet both, as I will argue, reconfigure in different ways dimension and duration, creating new alignments of space and time.

#### — REMEMBRANCE

Tracey Moffatt's *Up in the Sky* series of twenty-five photolithographs frequently uses perspectives that either look directly down from, or draw the viewer's gaze up to a blank and washed-out sky. Yet, this does not conjure a celestial or divine auratic. Instead, the depiction of an impoverished, mixed-race, isolated, outback settlement—with images of street brawls, a cow suspended bizarrely in overhanging branches, a white mother and black infant being driven away, the child taken by hovering nuns, a young man dazed and looking up at the sky—suggests dysfunction, and a loss of communicable experience and auratic interconnection. This deracinated effect is accentuated by the bleached-out steel blue and sepia toned prints, by the quasi-documentary, objective style, and by the elliptical quasi-narrative. This is no invocation of the on-high, but an empirical recording of the world beneath clouds: it is socio-historical realism not spiritual homage.

The images create a story, but one without structure, progression, resolution and ultimately with no final meaning except perhaps despair. Moffatt explains that she hoped to capture a sense of the in-between here: between documentary and invention, present and past, time and space, and between cohesive narrative moments.<sup>25</sup> The effect is decidedly not auratic or transcendent but a surreal dystopic estrangement. And yet *Up in the Sky* nonetheless transports us with its emotional and dramatic tensions, and more specifically touches us through its spatio-temporal ambiguities. In these images, Moffatt re-articulates space and time. As she explains:

In the *Up in the Sky* pictures there is a story line, but the hanging order of the pictures can change it around. There isn't a traditional beginning, middle and end. You can be in the present and shift to the past and come back to the present—it's playing with time and space.<sup>26</sup>

Not only would changes in the hanging order shift the narrative chronology but in addition the images resonate with equivocal and shifting historico-temporal references. In the Australian context the images of nuns holding, or stealing, an Indigenous child cannot but recall the stolen generations taken from their families in the now-infamous policies of integration. Yet in Moffatt's images this familiar history is ambiguously resituated in the present and reconceived with a White mother substituted for the Aboriginal mother of the stolen, generally mixed-race, children.

This temporal ambiguity, involving a recollecting of the past and its imbrication with the present is further enacted using the now-ubiquitous postmodern techniques of pastiche and quotation. The influence of Italian neo-realist filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini and of the *Mad Max* films in the *Up in the Sky* series has been noted by various commentators, who have also explored the haunting of the past in the present evident in both the content and techniques in many of Moffatt's works.<sup>27</sup> Temporal distortions, oscillations and lacunae disrupt empirical chronological time so that the past is no longer past but infiltrates the present. The destruction of Aboriginal families and ways of life not only haunt the present but are also reiterated in the present as poverty, marginality, violence and hopelessness destroy the life-world of this shantytown existence. Through these temporal indeterminacies Moffatt challenges the Australian state's claim that historical events are of the past and that present generations bear no responsibility for these past acts.

Moffatt's work clearly participates in and operates within this postmodern sensibility, and it also gestures toward something more or something beyond temporal pastiche. She uses pastiche, quotation and referencing of earlier works and genres, the hybrid amalgamation of multiple cultural references, and the articulation of remembered histories and events in current experience. Yet, while the postmodern utilises these techniques merely to create shock or disquiet, Moffatt's work partakes of both this postmodern shock-effect and reprises an antithetical aesthetics of the beautiful. Rex Butler and Morgan Thomas identify this unfashionable quality in Moffatt's work, which is in some ways inimical to the postmodern sensibility. While fully acknowledging that beauty is no universal concept and is subject to cultural and historical vacillations in taste, they also suggest that it is an attribute that captures us: 'it has to "strike" us (we have to be struck by it)', they write.<sup>28</sup> They suggest that beauty is always excessive, contesting current taste by hazarding the new, and it is in this sense unhistorical and untimely. 'Beauty', they write, 'opens the way out of historicism'.<sup>29</sup>

In *Up in the Sky* this beauty-effect gives rise to another anti-postmodern attribute—the auratic. While the sacredness and beauty of auratic art seems opposed to postmodern art, in Moffatt's decidedly postmodern work there is nonetheless a faint ghostly glimmering of aura. This is not to say that the auratic that haunts this work has a religious or sacred significance, rather the auratic element here is the secular, mundane experience of inter-connection with

and alienation from others, and with and from the worldhood of the world. While Moffatt with deft irony alludes to the 'Up in the Sky', her eye is firmly focused on the earthly life beneath clouds. The image of a young Aboriginal man lying concussed and possibly left for dead staring vacant eyed at an equally empty sky somehow inhabits and links the entire photoseries. This first and last and always present image of the dying or despairing youth is anti-auratic in the failure of the gaze between man and sky, and yet nonetheless auratic in its revelation of the loss of a world and a humanity that enfolds as it differentiates us with its gaze.

Moffatt's postmodern pastiche reprising of the past and her quasi-documentary photo-realism may seem the very opposite of Petyarre's rendering of ceremony through a fine-art aesthetic. Yet nonetheless there is evident in each artist an auratic effect. In Petyarre this operates through the veiled allusion to the Dreaming; in Moffatt it is instead the beautiful that creates the return of the gaze effect. However, this auratic rearticulation of spatiality as proximate remoteness is not the only connection between the urban and the desert artist: just as Moffatt reconfigures time through techniques of Proustian *recherche* and pastiche, I suggest that Petyarre too creates an alternative experience of time though not through recollection or quotation but by contesting the pastness of the past.

#### — TIME

In the face of what he perceived as the twin violations of capitalism and fascism, Benjamin conceived of the auratic in revolutionary terms—the overthrow of auratic art was a necessary stage in the creation of a new revolutionary culture and aesthetics.<sup>30</sup> Benjamin's anticipation of the death of aura may have been premature but his identification of the auratic and its vacillations remain pertinent.<sup>31</sup> Yet it is perhaps Benjamin's related concept of temporal constellations that may finally prove most useful in cultural analysis today. In order to salvage past moments, not recorded in conventional histories, from an untimely demise as they fade from consciousness, Benjamin elaborates an alternative conception of the temporal.

Benjamin rejected a conventional historicism that 'musters a mass of data to fill ... homogenous, empty time'.<sup>32</sup> These histories are constructed to reflect the dominant perspective as in them 'by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history'.<sup>33</sup> These conformist histories not only pay homage to the rising power but also reinforce a diminished form of time that is linear, merely calculative and empty. Benjamin opposed to this a differing form of 'materialistic' historiography and an alternative experience of 'Messianic' time. A historical materialist rescues moments of the past overlooked by the dominant histories. These moments flit by and are retrieved by 'brush[ing] history against the grain'.<sup>34</sup> Though not causally or chronologically linked these

moments may be crystallised together and given new significance: so, for example, ‘The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate’, and just as ‘fashion evokes costumes of the past’ the historical materialist reaches into the past to create a dialectical link with the now.<sup>35</sup> This method of historiography is related to Benjamin’s conception of messianic time. For Benjamin, time has been transformed in modernity, replacing time experienced through the significance of recurring days of festival and ceremony with time as measurement and calculation. Previously, association between past and present expressed in recurring celebrations and memorials made the past present and meaningful within the now; in modernity, time is reduced to a homogenous, empty equivalence devoid of significance.

Tracey Moffatt’s Proustian recalling of the past and integration of these moments into the narrative present—her reference, for example, to the recent history of the stolen generations within a story of outback racial aggression and despair—may be read as an enactment of a ‘Messianic’ temporality. *Up in the Sky* re-conceives the present infiltrated by and imbued with moments and events of the past. However, while Benjamin’s rethinking of temporality is undoubtedly one of the influences on the postmodern engagement with memory, forgetting and haunting, its activation as merely a recollecting of the past may be insufficient.

Kathleen Petyarre’s perhaps more subtle realignment of time does more than simply recall the past: instead it changes our experience of the past as bygone and re-constructs it as a presence in the now. In Petyarre’s work the current instant is the ephemeral moment and the past is the immemorial and continuing time of the now. Petyarre disturbs our usual perception of the presentness of the present and the gradual fading away of the past into non-existence. Instead her work suggests that the past does not simply haunt the present but rather that the past is our present world and constitutes this world. The present is the fleeting non-existent—always either not yet or already been—and it is the past that constitutes place and home. Petyarre’s work refutes the by-goneness of the past and constitutes it instead as the eternal.

Petyarre’s work reveals perhaps another aspect of Benjamin’s ‘Messianic’ time that may be retraced through to the influence of Henri Bergson. Bergson rejects a linear interpretation of time in which the present is the most vital and the past gradually recedes into obscurity. Rather, as Deleuze paraphrases Bergson:

... we believe that the past is no longer, that it has ceased to be ... Nevertheless, the present is *not*; rather, it is pure becoming ... The past, on the other hand, ... has not ceased to be ... it IS, in the full sense of the word: it is identical with being itself. It should not be said that it ‘was’, since it is the in-itself of being ... At the limit, the ordinary determinations are reversed: of the present, we must say that at every instant it ‘was’, and of the past that it ‘is’, that it is eternally for all time.<sup>36</sup>

Petyarre's work exhibits this 'survival of the past' as a past that is and that is everlasting.<sup>37</sup> Her allusions to the Dreaming stories are neither a history of sacred beliefs nor a remembering of the past so that the past that was infiltrates the present. Rather the representation of the Dreaming is an articulation of this past as the event that IS and IS for all time. To put this another way, what is depicted in Petyarre's work is the present always already as memory: a portrayal of the multitude of remembered events, moments and elements that are the present and that constitute the present as past.<sup>38</sup> Petyarre's work then may be read not only as a folding of space and matter that reworks objective physical dimension through affective meanings and significances, but also as a temporal rearticulation by in which the present is purely memory so that this past is the permanent that is and that endures.

— CODA: DOUBLE VISION

An image from Kim Scott's novel *Benang* also performs the survival of the past and subjectivising of space. Scott traces a movement from a White paternalistic mission to 'uplift and elevate'<sup>39</sup> the Aboriginal race to a very different experience of uplift which involves looking down on country. The narrator, Harley, searching for his lost Aboriginal heritage, resists the White discourse of 'uplift' associated with racial integration so as to discover the ways in which he had always already been uplifted. In this tracing of his family, Harley, in a sense, meets with, as he hears the stories of, his long dead ancestors. He gets to know his great-great-grandmother Fanny and great-great-grandfather Sandy One Mason (so called in the mistaken assumption that he was a White man), and their children Sandy Two, Harriette and Dinah (who was abandoned to die with her stillborn child by her White husband). Harley becomes acquainted also with his great uncle Jack Chatalong (so named because of his childhood trauma-induced silence), his aunt Kathleen (who as a child, terrified and disoriented, ran towards the massacre of her people), his grandmother Topsey and father Tommy. As Harley gets to know his ancestors his uplifting transforms from White 'civilising' integration into a physical movement: a timeless drifting through space and time. As he drifts into the sky he looks down on his family populating still and eternally his country:

This was sudden, not at all a gradual uplift—I was the one poised, balanced, hovering on shifting currents and—looking down upon my family approaching from across the vast distances my vision could cover—I was the one to show them where and who we were. Uplifted I was as I have always been; must be.<sup>40</sup>

These various images of landscape, country and cloud-strewn sky (in the work of Petyarre, Moffatt and Scott, to which we might add the films of Rachel Perkins and Ivan Sen) articulate the specificity of Aboriginal relation to land with—while they also defy and critique—dominant White histories, law and politics. Through what Paul Gilroy describes, in another

context, as a ‘double consciousness’ attained through being at once inside and outside culture, they elaborate an aesthetically intricate hybrid experience.<sup>41</sup> They also along the way explore, reinvent and subvert conventional understandings of space and time. If, as Benjamin contends, time has, in modernity, been stripped of its subjective, affective dimension and reduced to a merely qualitative, homogenous linear progression, space has perhaps been equally diminished through its constitution as an empirical, computable dimension. These artists in various ways contest the objectivist constructions of space and time using diverse techniques: pastiche, quotation, narrative disruption, auratic identification and anti-auratic alienation, historical retrieval and anamnesia. They disturb spatial order by invoking *(un)heimlich* affects through images of desert, rolling clouds and falling seeds that transform objective space into affective sociality. They unravel linear time not simply by recalling the past and rescuing lost histories but also by insisting that the past is now. These disruptions do not shatter space and destroy time but challenge our (post)modern exploitation, manipulation and calculation of an empirical and objective world and universe. They rearticulate space and time as constituted through subjective influences, social meanings and cultural experiences. This, not unlike the effects of filmic apparatus and technologies that Benjamin analyses, ‘bursts ... [our] prison-world asunder ... so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling’.<sup>42</sup>

---

LINNELL SECOMB teaches in the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on social philosophy, and on politics and ethics within poststructural frameworks. She is currently completing a book on philosophy and love to be published by Edinburgh University Press.

---

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1989, p. 258.
2. Benjamin, p. 84.
3. Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the Sky*, series of twenty-five photolithographic prints, 1997.
4. Petyarre, quoted in Christine Nicholls, ‘Kathleen Petyarre: An Artist for our Times’, in *Paintings by Kathleen Petyarre*, exhibition catalogue, Gallerie Australis, South Australia, 1999, p. 5. See too Kathleen Petyarre, *Genius of Place*, exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art, 9 May–22 July 2001.
5. Petyarre, quoted in Nicholls, p. 5.
6. Christine Nicholls, ‘Genius of Place: the Life and Art of Kathleen Petyarre’, in Kathleen Petyarre, *Genius of Place*, Wakefield Press, South Australia, 2001, p. 24.
7. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999, pp. 100–1.
8. Gilroy, p. 102.
9. Gilroy, pp. 91, 58.
10. Ian North, *Expanse: Aboriginality, Specialities and the Politics of Ecstasy*, exhibition catalogue, University of South Australia Art Museum, Adelaide, 1998.
11. Ian North, ‘The Kindness of Kathleen Petyarre’, in Petyarre, *Genius of Place*, p. 85.
12. Benjamin, p. 220.
13. Benjamin, pp. 222–3.
14. Benjamin, p. 222.

15. Benjamin, p. 240.
16. Nicholls, quoted in Michael Fitzgerald, 'Queen of the Desert', *Time Pacific*, 21 May 2001, no. 20, <[www.time.com/time/pacific/magazine/20010521/queen.html](http://www.time.com/time/pacific/magazine/20010521/queen.html)> accessed 7 March 2003.
17. Benjamin, p. 225.
18. Benjamin, p. 185.
19. Benjamin, p. 187.
20. Benjamin, p. 188.
21. Benjamin, p. 188.
22. Benjamin, p. 222.
23. Benjamin, pp. 236–7.
24. Tracey Moffatt and Gerald Matt, 'An Interview with Tracey Moffatt', in Paula Savage and Lara Strongman (eds), *Tracey Moffatt*, City Gallery Wellington, New Zealand, 2002, pp. 37, 33.
25. Moffatt and Matt, pp. 33–4.
26. Moffatt and Matt, p. 34.
27. See respectively Lynne Cooke, 'From "A Photo-Filmic Odyssey"', in Savage and Strongman, p. 46; Alexander Berg, 'Somewhere', in Tracey Moffatt, *laudanum*, Hatje Cantz Publishers, circa 1998, p. 36; Rex Butler and Morgan Thomas, 'Tracey Moffatt's Beauty', in Savage and Strongman; Alexander Tolnay, 'Tracey Moffatt and Australian Photography', in Moffatt, *laudanum*.
28. Butler and Thomas, p. 41.
29. Butler and Thomas, p. 40.
30. Peter J Hutchings, 'Through a Fishwife's Eye: Between Benjamin and Deleuze on the Timely Image', in Terry Smith (ed.), *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photographic Era*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2001, p. 106.
31. Lise Patt (ed.), *Benjamin's Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura*, Institute of Cultural Inquiry, Topanga, 2001.
32. Benjamin, p. 262.
33. Benjamin, p. 255.
34. Benjamin, p. 255.
35. Benjamin, p. 261.
36. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Zone Books, New York, 2002, p. 55.
37. Deleuze, p. 55.
38. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. NM Paul and WS Palmer, Zone Books, New York, 1991, p. 150.
39. AO Neville, cited in Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, Western Australia, 2000, p. 13.
40. Scott, p. 456.
41. Gilroy, p. 161.
42. Benjamin, p. 236.