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Munn: Walbiri Iconography

especially useful chapters on public access and cable's potential threat to privacy.

The book repeatedly implores citizens to become involved at the earliest stages—when officials are deciding if and under what conditions cable systems will be developed. Achtenberg attempts to dispel the intimidation of technology by including photographs of volunteers operating cameras, adjusting lights, editing film, and testifying at public hearings on technological matters. The photographs and accompanying text seem designed to rebut the industry argument that production of programming must remain the sole prerogative of the cable company.

Let me return once again to Parker's plea for assessment of communications technology and institutions. Parker asks that communications scholars realize that the timing of their research can influence social change. He notes that research on broadcasting was "too little, too late" to have any effect on the structure of broadcasting institutions. Parker maintains that institutions with a vested interest in technology are most susceptible to public directed change while they are undergoing a period of crisis or instability (1973). If Parker is correct, then the time for assessment of cable television by communications scholars is now. Indeed, Achtenberg's own involvement in SMAP resulted from his realization that the still fluid regulation of cable at the local level offered community groups a chance to influence the dissemination, development, and control of the new medium.

The cable operators are asking the public to refrain from interfering until the companies can realize a profit from their investment. Or, as Achtenberg sums it up: "Let us do whatever we can make a buck on, and sooner or later we may get around to giving you what you need" (p. 2).

Cable television is a powerful new medium; it is relatively undeveloped. But powerful economic institutions, often in partnership with their governmental regulators, are moving rapidly to solidify control. The present opportunity for the public interest to prevail over narrow economic concerns may not again present itself for decades. Yet Achtenberg believes that there is still time. Community groups can mobilize to demand public control. Communications scholars can evaluate the probable effectiveness of various forms of control and their social consequences. *The Cable Book* offers useful information to those of both groups interested in making a beginning.

In the last analysis, *The Cable Book* is what it purports to be: a handbook "for groups who are trying to figure out what [cable is] all about and what it is going to mean to them and their communities" (preface).

As such, *The Cable Book* has been prepared primarily for community organizers; but the book is worthwhile reading for students of visual communication, indeed for anyone interested in what this new communications technology portends.

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Walbiri Iconography. Nancy D. Munn. Preface by Victor Turner. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973. xxii + 234 pp., diagram, figures, map, photographs, bibliography, index. \$16.50 (cloth).

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The Walbiri, one of the semi-nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers of Central Australia, are well known for their art. This book is, however, not about their art but about the utilization of drawings as a part of what Munn calls a "semiotic" (p. 5) of Walbiri culture. The Walbiri semiotic is to be understood as an ordering structure which is formulated in myth, sign media, and ritual processes. It must be added that this semiotic is in reference to the Walbiri view of life sources and creation.

The book is organized around an introduction and eight chapters dealing with Walbiri beliefs, storytelling, and their representation in designs. The first chapter is an introductory chapter on Walbiri culture which among other topics delineates their social organization and the relationships of their patrilineal descent groups to their designs. This is done through the term *guruwari*. This term refers to both man's ancestral designs, which represent ancestors, and to "ancestral fertility power" (p. 29). Thus, *guruwari* refers, on the one hand, to the visual (designs) and, on the other, to invisible forces.

The second chapter is a general discussion of the different types of designs and to the functions of these designs. The basic types of designs are the *yawalyu*, the *ilbindji* and the *guruwari*. The *yawalyu* are women's designs which are regarded as unimportant to men and which come into existence through dreams or maternal inheritance. The basic functions of these designs are procreation, health, and the growth of children. *Ilbindji* designs are created by men to attract women as lovers. The *guruwari* designs are men's designs and, generally, cannot be seen by women. These designs can be painted on the body, ceremonial objects, the ground, boards, stones, and weapons. They are utilized as a part of camp ceremonies, dramatizations of ancestral events, circumcisions and fertility ceremonies. This makes the *guruwari* the more important set of designs.

The telling of stories through the utilization of sand designs is the topic of the third chapter. Stories are not told through designs among the Walbiri; designs are, however,

utilized as graphic images which accompany the telling of a narrative. Chapter 4 is about the women's designs; they usually refer to food gathering or ceremonies. Most of the contents of these designs are of edible animals. The graphic system is open-ended, and these designs are a continuation of designs utilized in ordinary narrative.

The next three chapters (5, 6, and 7) involve men's designs, and these too are a continuation of sand designs utilized in storytelling. These often involve the view that designs represent marks made by ancestors on the local topography. Men's designs are more specialized than those of women and are given a multiplicity of meanings by the narrator. These designs represent the importance of ancestors and through them the relationship between the individual and his social setting. The chapter on *banda* (fertility) ceremonies demonstrates the relationship between the design system and some ritual constructions. It also discusses symbolic dealings between opposite moieties.

In her conclusion, Munn states that Walbiri designs are codes which can be said to be a part of the norms that

regulate experience. Thus, the function of these designs as ritual assertion are fundamental to this society.

In her account of Walbiri iconography, Munn is concerned with a fundamental aspect of visual anthropology: the role and function of design within the ritual and social context of a society. It is through such studies of the visual aspects of the human experience that we can expect to reach a better understanding of the importance of visual materials in anthropology. Most anthropology is concerned with either the material aspects or the organizational aspects of human life. Munn's book bridges the material and organizational aspects of human life by extending her analysis to the visual. What is noteworthy is how thoroughly the visual materials complete the ritual and organizational aspects of Walbiri life. The importance of such studies for visual and for cultural anthropology has to be emphasized. Munn has given us an absorbing account of the importance of visual materials in the human experience by demonstrating the importance of designs among the Walbiri as a semiotic of human interaction.