



***Images of the Body and Corporeality of Indigenous
Australians at the Dawn of the 21st Century (Based on Bruce
Chatwin's Perspective and Selected Films)***
***Obrazy ciała i cielesności rdzennych mieszkańców Australii
u progu XXI wieku (na podstawie spojrzenia Bruce'a Chatwina
i wybranych obrazów filmowych)***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The research objective of this article is to examine what image of Indigenous Australians emerges from Bruce Chatwin's well-known novel *The Songlines* (1987/2008) and selected films produced at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries also dealing with Australian Aboriginal culture.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The analysis of the literary and cinematic work will be carried out here from an anthropological and postcolonial perspective, and is also part of a broadly defined somapoetics.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: In the first part, the author focuses on the way female and male characters are portrayed. In the second part, he analyses more complex portraits, those of artists, hunters, 'actors' and strong personalities, before concluding with the theme of death.

RESEARCH RESULTS: When analysed, Chatwin's novel appears to be a text with many omissions, presenting a selective image, marked by the author's ethnocentrism and his insufficiently insightful approach to cultural differences. Earlier films also fail to portray these in a credible way. Later films, however, not only deepen the understanding of historical and contemporary conditions, but also give the floor to representatives of this oldest culture in the world.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The conclusions of the analysis of the material studied encourage a more critical reading of Chatwin's novel. They also point to films depicting Indigenous Australians in a way that is free of postcolonial context, their different sensibilities and corporeality.

→ **KEYWORDS:** AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES, BRUCE CHATWIN, SONGLINES, FILMS ABOUT AUSTRALIA, POSTCOLONIAL CINEMA

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem naukowym artykułu jest zbadanie, jaki obraz rdzennych mieszkańców Australii wylania się ze znanej powieści Bruce Chatwina *Pieśni stworzenia* [*Songlines*] (1987/2008) oraz wybranych obrazów filmowych nakręconych na przełomie XX i XXI wieku, podejmujących tematykę kultury australijskich Aborygenów.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Analiza dzieła literackiego i filmowego zostanie tu przeprowadzona w perspektywie antropologicznej i postkolonialnej, wpisuje się również w szeroko pojętą somapoetykę.

PROCES WYWODU: W części pierwszej autor koncentruje się na sposobie przedstawiania postaci kobiecych i męskich. W części drugiej analizuje bardziej złożone portrety: artystów, myśliwych, „aktorów” oraz silnych osobowości, by zakończyć na motywie śmierci.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: W wyniku analizy powieści Chatwina jawi się jako tekst o wielu przemilczeniach, ukazujący obraz wybiórczy, naznaczony etnocentryzmem autora i jego nie dość wnikliwym podejściem do odmienności kulturowej. Wcześniejsze obrazy filmowe również nie ukazują ich wiarygodnego wizerunku. Późniejsze filmy nie tylko jednak pogłębiają rozumienie warunkowań historycznych i współczesnych, ale również udzielają głosu przedstawicielom tej najstarszej kultury świata.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE REKOMENDACJE: Wnioski z analizy badanego materiału zachęcają do bardziej krytycznej lektury powieści Chatwina. Wskazują również na filmowe obrazy ukazujące rdzennych Australijczyków w sposób wolny od kontekstu postkolonialnego, ich odmienną wrażliwość i cielesność.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **ABORYGENI AUSTRALIJSCY, BRUCE CHATWIN, SONGLINES, FILMY O AUSTRALII, KINO POSTKOLONIALNE**

Introduction

“On the wall behind, there were pictures of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh. Myrtle sucked her thumb and stared, bug-eyed, at the Queen’s diamonds” (Chatwin, 1988, p. 150) – this scene was supposed to have taken place at a police station in a small town in central Australia. Moments earlier, two women from one of the indigenous tribes had taken – though reluctantly – an oath on the Bible in order to apply for welfare. Myrtle was one of them. It was 1983 and Queen Elizabeth II had already been on the throne for nearly 31 years. The portrait that hung on the wall did not depict the recently deceased old lady in a hat, but a young monarch with her arms bare, wearing a crown and diamonds around her neck and arm. Dressed in a white gown girded with a navy blue sash, she proudly gazed into the space of the former colonial empire. All we know about Myrtle and her sister is what was recorded in Bruce Chatwin’s novel *The Songlines* published

in 1987: “two Aboriginal girls in dirty floral dresses” (1988, p. 149). Thirteen years earlier, Australian authorities had put a definitive end to the decades-long practice of forcibly removing half-breed children from Aboriginal families to adapt them to life in white civilization, which resulted in the so-called Stolen Generation. Practices so recent as selection on the basis of skin tone were evocatively portrayed in the 2002 Philip Noyce film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. This well-known movie is one of a growing number of releases depicting Australian indigenous people that hit the screens in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Of the many titles, it is especially worth noting those that best illustrate the shift in the depiction of Australian indigenous people: Nicolas Roeg’s (1971) *Walkabout*, Peter Weir’s (1977) *The Last Wave*, Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr’s (2006) *Ten Canoes*, and Warwick Thornton’s (2009) *Samson and Delilah*. These films are a sort of counterpoint to the famous novel by *Chatwin*, as they offer a complex picture of Australian natives in a period of rapid changes in their mental and living situation, at the same time shaping it and revealing it to the world.

The purpose of this article is to trace how literary and cinematic works construct the image of the corporeality of a people recovering from a period of colonialism, struggling with numerous problems, gaining their own autonomy and re-shaping their identity within Western and global civilization. Both literature and films take on a clear educational role, but most importantly, they shape perceptions of this community beyond Australia’s borders. They also provide interesting material for the study of cultural determinants in the perception of the body, which constitutes, within the somapoetics postulated by A. Łebkowska, a variant of the “opaque body,” i.e. one that loses “its obviousness and imperceptibility in many situations, especially in all varieties of otherness” (2011, p. 22). I will draw on literary and film studies to refer to anthropological issues of otherness in the context of the body as well as on postcolonial studies to show artistic strategies of depicting characters and, as a result, of creating their image, which is spread across the world through these works. Literature and film art have a very strong impact on the perception of the bodily difference of the Other.

Novel and film characters: a portrait of indigenous Australians

Chatwin’s novel, although it was written out of a desire to explore the mythology of indigenous peoples, yielded an interesting but also controversial picture of Australia’s late 20th century inhabitants. The writer set the novel in the period between the colonial era and multicultural policies, when the indigenous population, with the support of white activists, was gradually reclaiming their rights. For the most part, the native people lived between tribal life attempting to preserve their remarkably rich ceremonial tradition, and modernity with its benefits and curses. The writer had been interested in nomadism for years, which was the main motive for his two short trips to Australia. The latter, and also his best-known novel, has greatly popularized the mythology of the Australian Aborigines both among the white population of Australia itself and around the world. It has

also generated considerable debate: a particularly interesting debate emerged among journalists and scholars in 2017 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the publication of *The Songlines*. While there is no shortage of arguments in defense of the writer (Daley, 2017), the majority of voices from Australia are either moderately or highly critical (Cooke, 2017; Nicholls, 2019) and this criticism does not have to do with literary values, but with inaccuracies or even misrepresentations in the portrayal of life and aspects of the beliefs of native Australians. As Christine Nicholls concludes, “The book continues to mislead millions of people” (2019, p. 47). This researcher even makes accusations of implicit ethnocentrism and misogyny, but most of all she points to the writer’s misguided strategy, and faults him for “taking intellectual shortcuts” (Nicholls, 2019, p. 24), by drawing knowledge about the beliefs of Australian Aborigines mainly from their white friends. She also charges him with a “staggering lack of self-reflexivity” (Nicholls, 2019, p. 29) and creating a false image of himself.

When analyzing his novel, we will be interested in his view of nomads, the majority of whom often, though not always, live in abject poverty on the fringes of civilization. The motif of death appears several times in the book, and we know from the writer’s biography that, while in Australia for the second time, he was already aware of his fatal disease, AIDS.

The Songlines features a host of men and women, both white and black, that the narrator passes along the way, sketches with only a few words or portrays with longer descriptions, but these are almost never elaborate depictions. It would be interesting to look at all the characters, together with the white descendants of the colonizers, among whom we meet both people committed to helping the natives and those who call them “niggers” or “dirtbags.” Some of them even believe that Aborigines have a differently structured urinary system and brain lobes (Chatwin, 1988, p. 136). However, our interest will be in the indigenous people of the continent.

A number of aboriginal characters also appear in films. A look at the nearly 40-year history of this subject in feature cinema shows a clear evolution: from native characters being evoked as an exotic and therefore mysterious counterbalance to the civilization of Australia’s white inhabitants, as in 1970s and 1980s films, to their receiving more and more attention in films of the 21st century. In *Walkabout*, the protagonist is a boy who performs an initiation rite, and larger groups of black locals appear twice and only episodically, which highlights the gap between the two cultures of modern Australia. *The Last Wave* features several male “urban aborigines,” who, as in the previous film, constitute an exotic and troublesome intrusion into the life of white Australia, their customs and impenetrable mystery being both intriguing and terrifying. In Weir’s films, the camera often lingers on faces, accentuating an impenetrable calm that suggests a very different way of thinking. Black Australians become the main characters for the first time in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* but they are oppressed children. This is also the first film to address the issue of racially motivated segregation practices.

A radical change in optics is represented by *Ten Canoes*, a film showing the world of Australia before the invasion of Europeans with the fullest representation of indigenous

people, both men and women. This film marks a watershed moment for subject of indigenous people in cinema: white people do not appear in it at all, and the actors are amateurs, residents of one village, who communicate only in their tribal language. In the last film cited here, *Samson and Delilah*, the protagonists are a couple of young black Australians escaping from the squalor and poverty of the desert settlement, where they lived among their own people, to the city, where they lead a life on the margins of the white world.

In search of mythical antiquity: women's smiles and the "beauty" of hunting rituals

Interestingly, Chatwin pays almost no attention to any of the indigenous women, and usually focuses on a brief description of their dresses or other items of clothing, occasionally also remarking on their distinctive body features. For example, he describes the secretary of one of the novel's protagonists with a single sentence: "a pliant brown girl in a brown knitted dress" (Chatwin, 1988, p. 5). He only once remarks on an aspect of the local women's beauty: "His girlfriend sat at his feet. From time to time, she would stretch her lovely long neck across his thigh and he would reach out a finger and tickle her" (1988, p. 61) – this passage is about the dark-skinned former monk Dan Flynn, to whom we will return. Other descriptions point to the poor health and poor mental condition or poverty of the heroines. Most are extremely perfunctory, with rarely a few sentences:

"Nero's wife, it turned out, was the giantess I had watched playing poker. She was a good head taller than he, and about four times as wide. She was sitting behind her shelter, by the campfire, gnawing at a charred kangaroo ham. When Nero got into the car, their small son rushed after him, and did a high dive through the open window. The mother followed, weaving her kangaroo-bone bludgeon. She dragged the boy out by the hair and spat in his face (1988, p. 232).

For Nicholls, some of these descriptions are examples of Chatwin's "courteous misogyny," which betray a misunderstanding of the situation of people affected by colonialism (Nicholls, 2019, pp. 45-46). What is striking in these descriptions is the absence of faces. This can be read as an evasion: the writer not only kept silent about all the troublesome historical issues that led to such a dire situation, but he was also unable to describe the different type of beauty of local women. He was probably looking for in them what he once observed in the Nemad tribe in Mauritania, namely a smile (Chatwin, 1988, p. 146). This was thought to be an argument in support of his concept of nomadism as the best way of life for humans, which is also proof of his "tendency to overgeneralize" (Nicholls, 2019, p. 26). Chatwin had no intention of delving deeper into the lives of the inhabitants of the Australian desert, as his peer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio did in his 1980 novel *The Desert*. As Monika Rogowska-Stangret remarks, this Nobel laureate was able to abandon his Eurocentrism, to show how the nomadism of the ancestors, the "nomadism of bodies," has been preserved in the children's bodies (2016, pp. 218-249).

A similar pattern as in Chatwin's novel can be observed in early films, and here too we witness an evolution: at first black women are shown only in snapshots (*Walkabout*, *The Last Wave*). The faces of girls and older women accompany the viewers throughout *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, but we see them in situations of danger and oppression. Only *Ten Canoes* introduces a new quality: portraits of women, often young and smiling. The protagonist of the last film under discussion is also likable. According to Nahirny, the dominant aesthetic category in *Samson and Delilah* is ugliness (2014, p. 48), but this refers mainly to naturalistic images of everyday life. In contrast, caring for her ailing grandmother and weathering life's misfortunes, the teenage Dalila symbolizes the persistence of the younger generation and the continuity of tradition.

Unlike the images of women, men in Chatwin's novel are portrayed in more elaborate descriptions. The novel is brimming with succinct sketches, bearing the hallmarks of caricature, which often uses stereotypes that refer to body weight and dress: "An obese, bearded Aboriginal sat scratching the bites on his belly, and had set a buttock on each of two bar-stools" (1988, p. 33); "He was a pale, skinny, impish-looking old man with a wispy beard and one eye clouded with trachoma. [...] He was so skinny he kept having to hitch up his pants" (1988, p. 97). As with his descriptions of women, Chatwin acts as if he is describing marginalized people without considering why their situation is so dire.

Most of the characters in Weir's film are characterized by an impenetrable static quality, though not all: passivity is a mask against the whites, which conceals secrets reserved for members of the tribe. The exception is the more dynamic male characters played by the well-known actor David Gulpilil: in *Walkabout* he plays a young man doing very well in the bush, and in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* he tracks down runaway children. They too are shown to be either exotic opposites to whites or corrupt representatives of a persecuted minority.

Inspired by past descriptions of the beauty of hunting, Chatwin longed to include a description of it in his novel. However, the narrator, when he went on a hunt with contemporary natives, had his illusions dispelled. The hunt was eventually successful, but the kangaroo that orphaned her babies turned out to be too old for cooking, and her body was left in the bush, as there was nothing to cut off the tail with. Car bumpers, a shotgun and a wrench were involved in her killing.

How different are the hunting scenes in *Walkabout* and especially in *Ten Canoes*? In both of these movies, blacks take a ritualistic approach to hunting. The first film, at times aesthetically over-the-top, accentuates the young man's prowess and efficiency and juxtaposes his actions with the mindless shooting of animals practiced by white hunters using firearms. This can be interpreted as nostalgia for the noble savage. The second film recreates the ceremonial building of dugouts and waterfront platforms necessary for hunting geese. There is no excessive estheticization, the film gives the impression of an ethnographic feature at times.

“Magnificent ugliness” and the secret of strong personalities

Chatwin has included portraits of two artists in his book, one of whom he pays more attention to. Winston Japurula, the most important painter in Cullen: “He was an ageing voluptuary, with rolls of fat spilling over his paint-spattered shorts and an immense down-curving mouth. His sons and grandsons bore the stamp of his magnificent ugliness” (Chatwin, 1988, p. 287). In the use of the phrase “magnificent ugliness” we see again how the writer finds it difficult to go beyond the Western mentality, beyond the prevailing aesthetic canon in the white world: Others are always looked at from a distance. The corporeality of the natives is probably so alien to him that only an appreciation of talent or strength of personality allows him to breach his silence and describe ugliness as “magnificent.”

A cinematic portrait of the artist appears in *Samson and Delilah* as the aforementioned grandmother of the titular Delilah also paints pictures in a distinctive pointillist style. Living in poverty, the infirm old woman turns out to be a practicing Christian, full of humor and friendly to the granddaughter who takes care of her. The Western canon of beauty is breached here precisely because of the fondness with which this ailing and poor old woman is portrayed. Her poor attire and wrinkled face are not off-putting.

Returning to *The Songlines*, this “magnificent ugliness” is a formula that relates to many other descriptions, and most appropriately reflects the narrator’s feelings about selected natives. Indeed, there are some characters whose personality he is genuinely intrigued by. One of these was Alan of the Kaititj tribe, whom he describes mainly through his majestic features, contrasting with his tattered clothes (Chatwin, 1988, p. 106). Another was the aforementioned Dan Flynn, the first Aboriginal clergyman to join a mission, who eventually left the monastery and became an influential advocate for his tribesmen. But even in his portrayal of Flynn, Chatwin resorts to aestheticizing procedures, leaving out the description of his face, drawing attention rather to his original behavior (Chatwin, 1988, p. 61).

Titus of the Pintupi tribe, who is well educated in a Lutheran mission and speaks several languages, living simultaneously in two worlds, the civilized one and the desert one, is an equally charismatic character. The writer indulges in a more detailed description of the face here, betraying great writing skills:

He amazed me by his ugliness: the spread of his nose, the wens that covered his forehead; the fleshy, down-hanging lip, and eyes that were hooded by the folds of his eyelids. But what a face! You never saw a face of such mobility and character. Every scrap of it was in a state of perpetual animation (Chatwin, 1988, pp. 317-318).

To his surprise, the narrator noticed a stack of books topped by a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* on Titus’s table (Chatwin, 1988, p. 319).

As already mentioned, filmmakers also liked to pause the camera on the more prominent male characters. On two occasions, young boys become the main characters. In *Walkabout* there is excessive estheticization of some shots, such as the image of a young man leaning on a javelin against the sky shimmering with the colors of the setting sun,

or scenes of a mating dance with erotic overtones. In *Samson and Delilah*, on the other hand, the title male character is a sensitive mute growing up in poverty, permanently high on gasoline fumes: with his tousled hair, he arouses sympathy, but also horror at his predicament.

However, filmmakers especially bring out the unique beauty of the faces of elderly men, often with a thick beard. Such portraits in *The Last Wave* appeal to the stereotype of the old man: a wise man endowed with mysterious wisdom, inaccessible to strangers. In *Ten Canoes*, all the characters are depicted without excessive mystery, in situations natural to them: conversation, hunting, fighting or death. Only here the natives have different tempers and express a whole range of emotions, and more often than not, laughter: the stereotype has been broken.

Chatwin's novel also features natural-born actors: one of them is Alan's nephew (1988, p. 108). He was able to play the role of the mythical Lizard Ancestor brilliantly. Another was the "showman" from the Pintupi tribe, speaking with a distinct American accent, Joshua Wayne. While narrating one of the mythical songs, "Joshua stuck his tongue in and out like a lizard's and, twisting his fingers into claws, dug them crabwise into the sand to imitate the perenty's walk" (1988, p. 171). We can see here again Chatwin's preference: he is not so much interested in otherness, as he appreciates what he knows and values: people endowed with genuine talent.

The ritual behavior of one of the main characters of the *Ten Canoes* has a distinct theatrical quality. Stabbed with a spear by a member of a foreign tribe, he performs a ritual preparing him for death the next day. This scene and the subsequent lamentation and ceremonies around the deceased are a clear breach in the esthetics of the film, which was shot in ethnographic style. Thanks to the play with light and color, the whole rite acquires a quality of mystery, suggesting the deep spiritual substratum of Australian aboriginal culture, which is emphasized even by the shots of the dead body.

We can perceive a mythical substrate in what propelled Chatwin on his journey: in his *idée fixe*. He looked not so much for beauty among the Australian natives as for the life in myth, which could be expressed in the laughter characteristic of the nomads, as he believed. He sought out this natural laughter in spite of cultural differences, and not infrequently found it among the uprooted nomads living on the margins of civilization. One can risk the claim that in his book he demythologized his characters, while mythologizing the figure of the narrator-traveler, bearing the same name as him. In his essay on nomadic life, he evoked the example of the Bushmen, whose children never cry and are among the happiest children in the world (Chatwin, 2011, p. 55), and treated the laughter of a Nematic, deaf-mute old woman as "a message from the Golden Age" (Chatwin, 1988, p. 148). One can perceive a distinct Russophile trait in these words, resonating with anthropologist Vigdis Broch-Due's opinion on Africa of the romantic vision of the shepherd-nomad as a noble savage among the colonizers (after Rogowska-Stangret, 2016, p. 236). Perhaps this laughter was meant to be some sort of antidote to his own impending death. Indeed, Chatwin ends his novel with an image of three old men belonging to one of the Australian tribes:

They were almost skeletons. Their beards and hair had gone. [...] When they heard who Limpy was, all three smiled, spontaneously, the same toothless grin. [...] Yes. They were all right. They knew where they were going, smiling at death in the shade of a ghost-gum (Chatwin, 1988, pp. 325).

Conclusion

The Songlines evokes a picture of Australia's indigenous peoples that is superficial and full of silences, often concerning the corporeality of its characters. Chatwin does not use the method of participant observation: he does not penetrate into the world of an alien culture, he does not follow Husserl's postulate of *epoché*, which requires the suspension of the temptation to take things for granted (Dalsgård, 2018, pp. 161-165). He also completely ignores the question of his own corporeality: no transformation takes place in him. He remains Eurocentric, immersed in his own ideas, which are a distant legacy of the colonial era. This is probably a product of the British mentality that shaped him and the complicated personality of a bisexual who joined the Orthodox Church at the end of his life, his personal tastes and preferences as an aesthete and a globetrotter. One has to give the writer credit for being unbiased in his subjectivism. The evocative picture he has created has inspired many people from all over the world for more than 30 years. However, it is worth reading his novel critically.

Nor do films provide a complete picture of the life of Indigenous Australians during this important period. Although filmed in different styles, viewed chronologically, they show a clear evolution: from the creation of exotic beauty and mystery alien to Western civilization in the spirit of Russoism assimilated by the counterculture current in *Walk-about*, through the gradual foregrounding of the characters of Australian indigenous people measuring themselves against post-colonial challenges in *Samson and Delilah*, or portrayed as close as possible to the authenticity of their culture from an era not yet affected by destructive contact with Europeans in *Ten Canoes*. The last two titles bring another quality: they try to touch on a peculiar sensibility that can be seen as primordial to corporeality (Walczak, 2021, p. 24): the sensibility of the Other, escaping colonial oppression or postcolonial poverty.

Despite its many weaknesses, Chatwin's novel has gained global reach. As anthropologist P. Vaarzon-Morel said, perhaps Bruce has fallen victim to what we have come to understand about ourselves since then (quoted by Cooke, 2017). It is worth reading his novel today, while deepening one's knowledge of the historical aspects and contemporary circumstances of its characters' lives. Film makers can complement and deepen our understanding of this intriguing community: they teach us to see the world through the eyes of the indigenous inhabitants of the Australian continent. Indeed, more and more often we can hear their voice directly; for example, in the poems of contemporary poet Mudrooroo. His piece *Reincarnation* tellingly reveals the problem with accepting one's own "transparent" body: "suits and ties today cover the emptiness / of our souls, wandering in uncertainty / about what the new year or that next one will bring us" (2001, p. 34).

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