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Cover image: Ian Dunlop and crew filming with Djangkawu ceremony dancers. Photo by Philip Robertson, 1971, (© NFSA, Film Australia Collection).

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Contributors

Howard Morphy

Professor Howard Morphy is a visual anthropologist and author of many influential books on Aboriginal art in Australia. Howard Morphy co-edited one of the key visual anthropology texts, *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (1997, Yale University Press). He worked collaboratively with Ian Dunlop, initially during fieldwork in Arnhem Land, but has also drawn upon Ian Dunlop’s films from the Yirrkala Film Project within his own work. Howard has continued this engagement with ethnographic filmmakers at The Australian National University through his role as Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research and now the Research School of the Humanities and the Arts.

Philippa Deveson and Ian Dunlop

Philippa Deveson has worked extensively in ethnographic film, with long-running collaborations with colleagues who are featured in this volume. Philippa worked with Ian Dunlop on the Yirrkala Film Project and is still undertaking research and multimedia projects based on this and other film collections. Ian spent over thirty years making films for the Commonwealth Film Unit (later Film Australia). He is one of Australia’s foremost ethnographic filmmakers. He made the classic *People of the Australian Western Desert Series*; an epic film, *Towards Baruya Manhood* (1969), in Papua New Guinea; followed by the long-term Yirrkala Film Project in northeast Arnhem Land, consisting of twenty-two films shot over a period of twelve years. Ian’s films have won many awards—most notably the prestigious Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) Film Prize, which he shared with Philippa Deveson, for *Conversations with Dundiwuy Wanambi* in 1996. Ian has built up long-term relationships with the communities in which he has filmed and his films continue to be a valuable resource to them.

Gary Kildea

Gary is an internationally recognised ethnographic filmmaker, known particularly for classic films such as *Trobriand Cricket* (1974) and *Celso and Cora* (1983). When Gary first began making ethnographic films, he spent seven years living and working in Papua New Guinea with a core group of internationally recognised Australian filmmakers, including Les McLaren, Dennis O’Rourke, Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson. More recently, he won the Royal Anthropological Institute
(RAI) Film Prize for Koriam's Law (2005). In 2006 Gary received an American Anthropological Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contribution to visual anthropology.

David MacDougall

David MacDougall’s work has been highly influential within ethnographic film as a genre. David is internationally recognised for both his ethnographic films and his writing on visual anthropology and documentary cinema. David’s first film, To Live with Herds (1968–72), won the Grand Prix ‘Venezia Genti’ at the Venice Film Festival in 1972. It was one of the first films to subtitle the dialogue of its subjects, giving people from another culture their own voice. In 1997 David began the now famous Doon School Series (1997–2004) in India. His independent ethnographic films consistently win awards at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) International Festival of Ethnographic Film and he continues to be an innovative ethnographic filmmaker.

Natasha Fijn

Natasha Fijn is a Research Fellow in the College of the Arts and Social Sciences at The Australian National University, with a background in ethology and natural history filmmaking. She learnt ethnographic filmmaking techniques from the filmmakers featured in this volume. Natasha completed her PhD at The Australian National University, including a ninety-minute ethnographic film as part of her thesis, Khangai Herds (2008). She subsequently published her monograph as a book, Living with Herds (2011, Cambridge University Press), incorporating online video segments as key examples throughout the text.

Robert Nugent

Robert Nugent has a different background from the other filmmakers in this volume, although he acknowledges a strong influence from them, particularly from David MacDougall and Gary Kildea. Robert completed an MA at the Australian Film Television and Radio School in Sydney then set up an independent company, Viafilm—Visible Impact Assessment. His observational documentary End of the Rainbow (2007) followed the relocation of gold mining operations from Indonesia to a remote area of Guinea in West Africa. It has won international recognition with awards at festivals all over the world, including the First Appearance Award at the 2007 International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam.
Penny Moore

Penny’s most recent film, *Being Daisy*, was an integral part of her doctoral thesis, entitled ‘Living a musical life: musicians, music-making and the creation of space in Vienna’. She completed both a masters and a PhD in visual media at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology. Her research is concerned with social, sensual and participatory practices of music making through which she explores links and relationships between making and being. She is passionate about a practice-based, ethnography-centred anthropology.
Preface: Perspectives on Ethnographic Film

Natasha Fijn and Philippa Deveson

In 2011, The Australian National University celebrated sixty years of anthropology with a conference and exhibition that included panels and displays on the use of film within anthropology as a discipline. In the same year, the Centre for Visual Anthropology was set up at The Australian National University to highlight the work of internationally renowned ethnographic filmmakers and anthropologists across the university. The idea for this volume was inspired both by these milestones and by the presentations of those filmmakers and other practitioners in a Master of Liberal Arts program course, ‘Masterclasses in Ethnographic Film’. In short, it is intended to mark the special place of ethnographic film at The Australian National University.

The papers that follow present the perspectives of a diverse range of filmmakers, ranging from early career academics to well-established practitioners with decades of experience and international reputations. As will become clear when reading this issue, they have many connections and have influenced each others’ approaches to filmmaking. The impact of key ethnographic films, which has inspired the filmmakers to push boundaries and to try new, innovative techniques, is also evident. The papers and discussions focus on key films made by each filmmaker, and clips of relevant film excerpts are made available as ‘associated media files’ on the ANU E Press web site.

The first chapter, written by Howard Morphy, provides some historical background to ethnographic film within visual anthropology at The Australian National University. As Director, first of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research and more recently the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, Howard Morphy has been instrumental in providing an environment that fosters visual anthropology. From early in his career, he developed a particular interest in ethnographic film and has a continuing enthusiasm for visual research and film-related projects. He and his wife, Frances Morphy, met filmmaker Ian Dunlop in 1974 while carrying out fieldwork at Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land. From that time both were involved as advisors to the Yirrkala Film Project. In 1981, Howard Morphy suggested his former student Philippa Deveson to work as a research assistant for Ian Dunlop on the project. Deveson worked with Dunlop over many years and has in more recent years worked with Howard Morphy on his own multimedia and film projects.
With input from her long-time colleague, Philippa Deveson’s paper follows the trajectory of Ian Dunlop’s filmmaking over a decade of fundamental change in approaches to ethnographic film that began about the mid-1960s, following the development of new lightweight cameras and synchronous sound. The paper highlights how these technological developments made possible a much closer engagement with the people being filmed. Cameras were able to follow people more flexibly and, with subtitles, it was now possible to both hear and understand what they were saying.

Included within this issue are edited versions of two unique discussions, recorded in 2001, between the internationally recognised ethnographic filmmakers David MacDougall and Gary Kildea. Both filmmakers have had a long association with The Australian National University. Gary Kildea worked for more than twenty-five years in the Ethnographic Film Unit in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, where he joined Timothy and Patsy Asch during the 1970s. Howard Morphy’s paper recalls the convivial Friday-evening film screenings organised about that time by Timothy and Patsy Asch and David and Judith MacDougall. In 1997, David MacDougall was involved in setting up the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at The Australian National University and was based there while editing the Doon School Series. David MacDougall continues to produce films as Adjunct Professor in the Research School of Humanities and the Arts.

The first of the discussions focuses on Gary Kildea’s classic observational film *Celso and Cora* (1983) and details Gary’s impressions nearly two decades later in direct response to viewing sequences within the film. The second discussion is related to the first film in David MacDougall’s Doon School Series, *Doon School Chronicles* (2000). The shot-by-shot discussions make fascinating reading, with Gary and David bouncing ideas and concepts off one another, while online video excerpts give the reader access to a selection of the film segments being discussed.

Natasha Fijn came to The Australian National University with a background in animal behaviour research and natural history filmmaking. Through the influence of filmmakers such as David and Judith MacDougall and Gary Kildea, she adjusted her filmmaking style and philosophy to align more with an observational approach to filmmaking. During her doctoral research, she filmed herders and herd animals within a multi-species hybrid community: two herding encampments in Mongolia. Her paper refers to three video segments of footage filmed in the field in the Khangai mountains of Mongolia. Through a description of the stylistic and logistic techniques employed while filming these video segments, she advocates an alternative approach in the production of video-based, multi-species etho-ethnography.
Robert Nugent discusses two films he completed in 2011, which were made during his time as a Visiting Fellow with the Digital Humanities Hub in the Research School of Humanities and the Arts (2009–11). *Memoirs of a Plague* (2011) follows battles to control locust plagues in different parts of the world and works as a metaphor for man’s never-ending war with nature. At the same time, it attempts to subvert the standard ‘wrath of God’ locust narrative, casting locusts as its protagonists rather than as antagonists. Robert goes on to reveal how he reworked his footage for a second film, commissioned by a major television distribution network. Out of the idiosyncratic *Memoirs of a Plague*, he was contractually obliged to make a very different film. He found himself having to conform to a genre he had set out to critique and obliged to provide a film that, while distorting his original ideas, says much about different approaches to filmmaking.

After completing her undergraduate degree at The Australian National University and a doctoral thesis in visual anthropology at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, Penny Moore returned to The Australian National University as a Visiting Fellow at the Digital Humanities Hub (2011). Penny’s paper demonstrates the potential for text and film to complement each other. Drawing on her ethnographic work with professional musicians in Vienna, she considers how working with a camera in the field can be transformative for both anthropological knowledge and ethnographic understanding. She reflects on the making of her film as a medium of communication, but also on the filmmaking process itself as necessarily embodying the kind of ‘mindful’ state attained by highly skilled musicians.
Becoming a Visual Anthropologist

Howard Morphy

Histories are full of pitfalls, especially if written by those who have had a part in them.

— David MacDougall

I have decided to use biography as the framework for this essay. Ethnographic film has been central to my engagement with anthropology since first coming from University College London to The Australian National University as a graduate student in 1973. My career as an anthropologist has been unusual in that I have always been in environments where ethnographic film was considered an integral part of at least some of my teachers’ and colleagues’ conception of anthropology.

I came to University College London as an undergraduate to study social anthropology. My aim was to learn as much as I could about the ways of life of people of the ‘developing’ world as preparation for a career helping alleviate hunger and disadvantage. While I like to think I have never lost the motivation to work with people for the betterment of the world, I developed a specialist interest in the anthropology of art and material culture as a result of the courses I studied and the charismatic teaching of a young lecturer, Peter Ucko. The first ethnographic films that I watched were part of the courses that he taught. The films were made under the auspices of the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen at Göttingen in Germany. The emphasis of the institute was on scientific purity and the comparative method. The films selected focused on technical processes in the manufacture and use of material-culture objects. Science in this context often seemed too objectifying, looking at the technical processes of distant cultures as if they were disconnected from the overall life of the society. Nonetheless, while sitting in the darkened lecture theatre with the films in glistening black and white, I found the magic of film was not entirely absent.

I was also able to experience films of a very different genre: John Marshall’s *The Hunters* and Robert Gardner’s *Dead Birds*. These films were gripping in their narrative structure and in the raw emotions they conveyed. Belonging to a genre of films influenced by Flaherty’s pioneering feature *Nanook of the North* (1922), they sat on the borders between documentary and narrative cinema, opening up ethnography to a wider audience.

Peter Ucko had close links to the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). In British anthropology the RAI has always had a dialogical relationship with the academy. The RAI has carried the history of anthropology forward by keeping alive interests that the university academics have left behind. Arguably the RAI maintained the interdisciplinarity of anthropology at times when social anthropologists, archaeologists and biological anthropologists felt they had little in common. Yet the RAI was also sensitive to emerging issues arising from the grassroots of popular interest in areas ranging from child abuse, race relations and human rights to the teaching of anthropology in schools. The RAI maintained close links to museums and libraries and built significant archives of its own. It is not surprising, given its role in British anthropology, that in the 1970s it created two specialist research panels, one in art and the other in ethnographic film. The leading protagonists included Peter Ucko, Anthony Forge and James Woodburn. The two panels held regular meetings in London and, to an undergraduate student, they provided privileged access to two of the strands of the emerging discipline of visual anthropology. Sometimes they sat jointly as when Adriaan Gerbrands came to show his film *Matjemosh*.

I saw two films in the early 1970s that had a great impact on me: David and Judith MacDougall’s *To Live with Herds*, on the pastoral Jie of Kenya, and Ian Dunlop’s *Towards Baruya Manhood*. The MacDougalls’ film was of almost transcendent beauty, attuned to the aesthetics of the Jie. More than that it allowed the viewer to see the world from the perspective of the Jie as it emerged in dialogue with the filmmaker—how they coped with the difficulties of life facing drought. The commentary was a discourse internal to the film, the product of what David MacDougall later referred to as participatory cinema. Grimshaw has recently summarised the MacDougalls’ achievement: ‘By working with rather than

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6 MacDougall, D. 1972, *To Live with Herds*, University of California at Los Angeles/Rice University Media Centre, Calif.
7 Dunlop, I. 1972, *Towards Baruya Manhood*, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.
against the distinctive aesthetic qualities of the medium, *To Live with Herds* began to outline the contours of a new anthropology.\(^9\) In Dunlop’s case, I was present at the film’s initial screening at the National Film Theatre in London, an event facilitated by James Woodburn.\(^10\) *Towards Baruya Manhood* is an account of the initiation ceremonies of the Baruya, a people of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. It was made in collaboration with the anthropologist Maurice Godelier. It is a film of epic proportions, divided into nine sections, which together last for some eight hours. The film provides such detailed coverage that it enables the viewer to gain a sense of participation in the ritual, revealing the potential of film as a documentary process. My abiding image of the film is of the building of the ceremonial house as young men swing on tall poles bringing them together to be joined at the centre to create the framework of the building.

![Building of the ceremonia house](image)

**Figure 1 The building of the chimya ceremonial house**

Source: Production still from *Towards Baruya Manhood*, 1969 (© NFSA, Film Australia Collection)

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10 For technical reasons, prints of the film required processing through a specialist laboratory in London since Kodak had not developed an inter-negative for the film stock used to shoot it. Dunlop had been spending part of the year attached to the National Film School at Beaconsfield at the invitation of Colin Young, who had been the MacDougalls’ teacher at the Ethnographic Film Program at the University of California at Los Angeles.
Moving to the Epicentre

In 1973 I arrived at The Australian National University to undertake doctoral research. I had no idea that in moving to Australia, and to Canberra in particular, I was moving to one of the epicentres, albeit fragile, of anthropological filmmaking. Anthropological filmmaking can arguably trace its origins to Haddon's 1898 Torres Strait Island expedition and Spencer and Gillen's pioneering work in central Australia in 1901. The subsequent years were fallow ones and indeed with few exceptions film was largely neglected by anthropologists until after World War II; however, that situation was beginning to change and in May 1973 the Museum of Modern Art in New York organised the first *Major Retrospective on Anthropological Cinema*. Australian films were well represented. The program included Spencer and Gillen's films and Ian Dunlop's *Desert People* and concluded with *Towards Buruya Manhood*. Roger Sandall’s *Gunabibi: An Aboriginal fertility cult*, made with the assistance of anthropologist Nicolas Peterson, had a considerable impact on the program’s guest director, Emilie de Brigard, and, in the program notes, she is quoted as feeling that the ceremony ‘has the blood and grandeur of Wagnerian opera—Australian Aboriginal rites may seem offensive to some Westerners—there’s nudity and painting of the body with blood—but to me because of films such as these Aborigines are among the most beautiful of people’. The program also included the MacDougalls’ *To Live with Herds*.

In Canberra Frances Morphy and I prepared to undertake fieldwork in eastern Arnhem Land among Yolngu people. The focus of my research was to be on change in Yolngu art and in particular on bark paintings as market commodities. Two of Roger Sandall’s films made with the assistance of Nicolas Peterson were part of my preparation for the field: *Gunabibi* and *The Djungguwan of Yirrkala*. The latter film was made at Yirrkala, which was to become the site of our own fieldwork. Sandall’s films had been sponsored by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which was paying for our fieldwork. When we arrived in Canberra, Sandall had already left to become a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Sydney. Nicolas Peterson, however, had a research fellowship in the Anthropology Department of the Research School of Pacific Studies, and we were able to meet him briefly before we left for the field.

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12 Dunlop, I. 1965, *Desert People*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.
Encountering Dunlop

We arrived in Yirrkala at the beginning of July 1974. For Yolngu it was a time of uncertainty. They had lost a major court case to gain title to their land and were witness to a mining town being built on their doorstep. At the same time the Methodist Church was supporting moves towards increasing autonomy and self-government for Yolngu and there were signs that their land rights were about to be recognised as a result of the Woodward Commission. Partly as a consequence of the advent of the mining town and the determination of people to protect their rights in land, the outstation movement had gained momentum. After a period of centralisation at the mission, people were moving out to establish small settlements on their traditional lands, with the support of the mission. In keeping with the desire for autonomy, people from outside were barred from visiting the outstations. It was a difficult time for two apprentice anthropologists to arrive in the field, and throughout our first weeks we struggled to overcome both our sense of being intruders and people’s uncertainty about our role. Even in the case of a society as outgoing and accommodating of others as Yolngu have proved to be, there are times when people have to question the basis of their engagement with outsiders.

Before leaving for the field I had photographed the main collections of bark paintings from eastern Arnhem Land in museum collections. Part of my field methodology was to re-document the paintings and to establish the trajectory of Yolngu art over time. Each day I would try to find someone interested in going through my laminated sheets of photographs. On 9 July I visited Narritjin Maymuru with whom I hoped to work:

His approach was somewhat cool and it took a little while sitting before he gradually became warmer. He said that on the mission with people living together some of the stories some of the law had got confused and that on the outstations they had to agree on the one straight line on the songs and on the ceremonies. He was interested in the old paintings but showed me a folder of his own ‘which is what we do now’—he is keeping the photographs so that if he dies before passing everything on to his sons, they will be able to copy it and the law won’t be lost. It was a folder of photographs taken by Ian Dunlop.

Narritjin let me know that he was expecting Ian Dunlop’s arrival to film his return to his homeland, Djarrakpi. I was a little disappointed to hear that he was about to set off to Djarrakpi to prepare for Ian’s arrival.

A month or so later Ian Dunlop arrived with his film crew and moved into the mission guesthouse, which we had made our home. It was an interesting time. Ian had been filming at Yirrkala since 1970 in what became known as the Yirrkala Film Project. The project was instigated to document the impact of the development of the bauxite mine and the mining town of Nhulunbuy on the people of Yirrkala. As Deveson shows, the project changed its focus over time and broadened partly because of the agency of the Yolngu people. In addition to documenting the mine and people’s response to it, Dunlop agreed to Yolngu requests to film their life more generally, in particular their ceremonial performances.

Ian’s memories of Frances and me in the early days of his meeting us are hardly flattering. He recalls that we left each day in the heat of the morning sun burdened by heavy Uher tape recorders, bags and cameras, to return several hours later sweaty, exhausted and frustrated, having found all the people we intended to talk to about our research were away somewhere else. Certainly the initial months of fieldwork as an anthropologist are not easy ones! Over the next two years we spent much of the time living at Yirrkala and developed a close working relationship with Ian that has continued to the present.

All ethnographic filmmakers develop their own style in dialogue with developments in anthropology as well as in film and cinema. Few in number, they have often taken a leading role in both disciplines. The late 1960s saw the beginnings of a time of paradigmatic change in anthropology, though perhaps not one that created discontinuities with the discipline’s past as major as some have argued. Anthropology became increasingly the centre of contested theoretical frameworks. Anthropologists were becoming more aware of the ethical dimension of their work in an increasingly postcolonial world. This resulted in an increasing focus on the nature of representational processes and their relationship to power and authority. A reflexive theme developed in anthropology and emerged strongly in the 1980s. Visual anthropologists from the 1960s on were fully engaged in this process of change, in particular in foregrounding the dialogical nature of anthropological research, giving agency to the participants and in exploring new ways of communicating anthropological knowledge by using the potential of visual media. Anna Grimshaw summarises what she refers to as the observational turn in ethnographic filmmaking well when she writes that it ‘signaled a significant epistemological, philosophical,

18 MacDougall, ‘Colin Young, ethnographic film and the film culture of the 1960s’, p. 82.
and aesthetic shift. It was founded in a new approach to the world that respected its materiality, its continuity, and fundamental ambiguity. And it hinged on a different conception of knowledge, one that was fundamentally relational.’

In Ian Dunlop’s case his films moved from an almost romantic genre, in the case of Desert People, sharing a family relationship with Flaherty’s Nanook of the North, to a mode of anthropological filmmaking that gave voice and agency to the people being filmed. By the time of the Yirrkala Film Project, Dunlop was determined to use advances in synchronous sound recording and subtitling to convey Yolngu views about the impact of the mine in conversations amongst themselves and with him as an interviewer. Dunlop had also become part of the world discourse in ethnographic film through his participation in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Round Table in Ethnographic Filmmaking in the Pacific, held in Sydney in 1966.\footnote{23}

Ian was, however, far from being a free agent himself. The nature of his filmmaking was influenced by the fact that he worked within the relatively conventional framework of the Commonwealth Film Unit and as a member of a team, which included himself as director with a soundperson and cameraman. This imposed certain constraints in financial terms and on the time he was able to spend in the field. Ian was also in a sense working for a number of different ‘masters’: the Commonwealth Film Unit, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), who provided additional funding, and Yolngu people themselves. The first required films that fitted the original brief of documenting the impact of the mining town, the AIAS encouraged the documentation of aspects of Yolngu ‘traditional’ culture, and Yolngu took Dunlop at his word that he was working in partnership with them. In the end the diversity of films produced became the positive outcome of the contradictory pressures that he experienced, and reflect his persistence in working to produce the kind of film he believed to be appropriate for the topic. The films overall range from investigative documentary through biography to recordings of ceremonial performance.\footnote{24}

Our chance encounter with Ian, combined with his essentially collaborative nature, was to result in our lifelong engagement with ethnographic film and provided us with access to resources that would greatly facilitate our own research. Over the following two years in the field we began to work closely with Ian on a number of film projects, with Frances and I becoming de facto anthropological consultants in the field. Nancy Williams, who had been the official consultant on the initial project, also continued as an advisor and an invaluable supporter to our own research.

\footnote{22 Grimshaw, ‘The bellwether ewe’, p. 255.}
\footnote{23 See Deveson, this volume.}
Our roles in working with Ian and his film grew over time. I developed a close relationship with many of the people whom Ian had been filming, in particular the artists Narritjim Maymuru and Dundiwuy Wanambi. Frances began working on her grammar of the Djapu language and I began to understand more about the social context of Yolngu art and ritual. In addition to providing some relevant information, I became a useful production assistant, helping with lighting night-time shooting by holding the sun gun, carrying reels of film, collecting water from the spring and generally learning the business.

Ian had no intention of filming ritual when he first arrived at Yirrkala. He understood that his main focus should be on the impact of the mine. Yolngu had other ideas. They were aware that previous filmmakers had made recordings of Yolngu ceremonial performances. Filmmakers were interested in filming ritual and Yolngu were interested in having films made of their rituals. Yolngu motivations were complex but the one most commonly expressed was to make a record for future generations so that they would be able to learn from it. Ian had filmed a number of rituals prior to us beginning fieldwork, including a circumcision ceremony, a house-opening and a major memorial ceremony based on the form of the Dhuwa moiety Ngārra.

Dundiwuy Wanambi, a leader of the Marrakulu clan, planned to hold a Djungguwan ceremony at his homeland of Gurka’wuy on Trial Bay in the dry season of 1976. Dundiwuy had worked closely with Ian and had been a participant in the earlier performance of the same ceremony that had been filmed by Roger Sandall. He persuaded Ian to make a film of ‘his’ Djungguwan, and Frances and I were invited along as assistants. In the event two ceremonies were filmed; while preparations were under way for the Djungguwan, a young child died in the night and a burial ceremony was held for him.

In the weeks we spent at Gurka’wuy I became totally absorbed in the process of filmmaking and began to realise the potential that film had for anthropological research. Yolngu rituals are complex events and, as Emelie de Brigard perceptively noted, operatic in their scale. Yet to the casual observer they are scripted anew each time they are performed. Each burial ceremony, and each circumcision ceremony, seems to differ from the one before. In seeing a Yolngu ritual for

25 Dunlop, I. 1983, In Memory of Mawalan, Film Australia, Sydney.
26 The result was Dunlop’s 1989 film monograph, Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy (Film Australia, Sydney). The film lasts for some five hours and the title signals Dunlop’s intention to produce a documentary film that provides an anthropological interpretation of the event in addition to giving the opportunity to observe the performance. A follow-up almost two decades later was the production of a DVD, Ceremony—The Djungguwan of Northeast Arnhem Land (Graham, T. 2006, Film Australia, Sydney). The DVD resulted from filmmaker Trevor Graham being persuaded by Yolngu to film another Djungguwan ceremony at Yirrkala in 2002. In addition to Graham’s film, the DVD includes an edited version of Dunlop’s film as well as edited sequences from Sandall’s 1966 film. The three films provide a perspective on the ways in which the Djungguwan ceremony has changed over nearly forty years. The DVD also includes complementary filmed commentaries by the filmmakers and anthropologists involved in the two projects.
the first time everything surprises. It is like being present at the opening performance of a play in a foreign language one barely speaks. Filming a Yolngu ritual requires recording on film events that one does not fully understand at the time, without a script to let you know what is coming next.

After observing a number of mortuary rituals, I began to be attuned to the possibilities and sense the structure. There are sequences of events that usually occur in a given order, though the content of those events, the particular singing and dancing sequences performed, their number and variation will differ every time.27 The child’s funeral at Gurka’wuy was the third one I had attended and the Djungguwan the second. But I must confess that the previous ceremonies were only partially recorded. I was not at Yirrkala to record ritual but to work on the iconography of paintings and, although I saw the relevance of the ritual context to understanding Yolngu art, my primary focus was on the art objects themselves. Attending ceremonies for days on end was a diversion. I dropped in on ceremonies and attended the high points. Ian Dunlop’s objective was to provide as comprehensive a record of the events as possible and in assisting him I had to pay attention of a different kind. I had to follow the camera into the heart of the action but always be aware of the wider context, if only to make sure that I kept out of the shot. Ian was certainly not concerned to erase my presence but neither did I want to interrupt the viewer’s engagement with the ritual action. And I had to document the event as meticulously as I could in order to assist with the editing.

On the occasions I worked with Ian he was part of an exceptional team, with Dean Semler as his cameraman. Ian’s method as director was to remain for the duration of a shot as close to the eye of the camera as he could be without looking through the lens—almost an adjunct to the cameraman, able to whisper in his ear and alert him to action happening elsewhere. Though there would of course be many occasions where there was room for the cameraman alone. In Semler’s case, little prompting was necessary, as he seemed to know instinctively when to widen the shot and when to close in, how to film a complex and apparently chaotic moment of ritual action so that when it was viewed the order was revealed. Indeed when reviewing the filmed material in the cutting room it was surprising how much it made sense and how little appeared to be missing. How Ian and Dean were able to achieve this in itself provides insights into the nature of Yolngu ritual action, its organisational structure and to the relative autonomy of the aesthetic flow of the event.

Yolngu rituals build up sequences of action through processes of repetition and recursion. The performers will repeat the same song and sequence of action a number of times before moving onto the next, and an analogous episode may

27 Morphy, H. 1984, Journey to the Crocodile’s Nest, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.
be enacted a number of times by a different group of people. For example, a series of different dances may be performed as a prelude to opening a shade where a body lies waiting for burial; each dance concludes with the symbolic opening of the shade. As sequences are repeated, the intensity builds until a concluding act is performed or the climax signalled, after which people move on to the next episode. At times one song flows into the next and often it is difficult to determine when a song has ended or when one is about to begin. This posed difficulties to a filmmaker in the pre-digital era when there was a need to conserve film. One of the things that Ian learnt early on in his filmmaking with Yolngu was that it was important to them to capture the beginning of the song and to record it as a whole. This also fitted in with Ian's own desire to create a sense of time associated with the ritual performance rather than aim to produce edited highlights of the most dramatic action.

What Ian learnt about filming Yolngu ritual made his film an exceptional resource for anthropological research and for re-documenting because the contextual material was there. The moments before and after a particular song had been sung, in which people discuss where to go next or make specific references to peoples' connections to the song, were all there to be discovered in the process of translation. The very fact of reviewing the material with different participants also yielded a diversity of perspectives, all of which were relevant to understanding the significance of the ritual action. Yet at the same time the filming of particular dramatic episodes and the powerful flow of action contained within them enabled one to be attuned to the aesthetic of the performance as a whole and how it might create an inter-subjective sense of being part of a whole.

Connecting to Canberra

While we were becoming involved in ethnographic filmmaking in the field with Ian Dunlop, serendipity was at work in Canberra. In 1975 we returned there for a mid-fieldwork break and began to analyse our material. We learnt that David and Judith MacDougall had arrived at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to run the film unit. When we returned from our second period of fieldwork in 1976, Timothy Asch had arrived as a Research Fellow in the Anthropology Department at the Research School of Pacific Studies. Tim was accompanied by his wife, Patsy Asch, with whom he collaborated on many of his film projects.

28 ibid., pp. 77–85.
Tim Asch had been at the heart of developments in ethnographic film in the United States. He was a passionate advocate of the use of film in teaching anthropology and as a means of communicating the results of anthropological research. He had been a graduate assistant to Margaret Meade, one of the pioneers of visual anthropology. He used new technology and in particular developments in subtitling to create films that analysed particular events captured on camera. His most renowned film is probably *The Ax Fight* (1975), one of the series of films he produced on the Yąnomamö as a result of his collaboration with the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon. The use of freeze-frame and enlargements enabled him to enter into the course of a fight that began on the far side of the village compound and was caught in a distant shot. *The Ax Fight* was an educational film but at the same time a real-life documentary drama brought to life by the techniques of cinema. Asch had worked closely with John Marshall and with him established Documentary Educational Resources, one of the main resources for the archiving and distribution of ethnographic film.

The Aschs and the MacDougalls encouraged people who were interested to become involved in their filmmaking. Tim and Patsy worked closely with a number of ANU anthropologists in the field. James Fox was appointed an Associate Professor of anthropology at The Australian National University in 1975. He had worked with Tim Asch previously at Harvard and was instrumental in his appointment to The Australian National University. The Aschs worked closely with James Fox and with a number of doctoral students undertaking fieldwork in Indonesia, in particular Douglas Lewis and Linda Connor. The MacDougalls’ method of filmmaking was different; essentially they were their own ethnographers. But they involved colleagues in viewing and providing feedback during the editing process; however, as far as I was concerned, perhaps the most important contribution the MacDougalls and the Aschs made was to establish an informal forum for colleagues and graduate students who were passionate about ethnographic and documentary film in the Friday-evening film screenings that rotated from house to house. The meetings were open to all who were interested but revolved around a core of regular participants including Anthony Forge, Ros and Nic Peterson, Andrew and Merrilyn Pike, John and Lesley Haviland, Roger and Shelley Keesing, the Morphys, Douglas Lewis, and assorted young children. Most of the participants had themselves some direct or indirect involvement in ethnographic film. Anthony Forge was an excellent photographer; he had shot his own footage in the field and had worked with a number of filmmakers. Nicolas Peterson had made one film himself in the field (*Nomads in Clover*, 1966) in addition to working closely with Roger Sandall.

Keesing and the Havilands had strong interest in the use of film in linguistics and anthropology and Andrew Pike was both a historian of film and a filmmaker. Complementing the quality of the films was the quality of the food and wine that accompanied our fellowship.

Canberra at that moment in time was probably the best place in the world to be for a graduate student with a developing interest in ethnographic film. In addition to being provided with a privileged environment for learning about the history of documentary film, appreciating how films were made and how they created meaning and experience, I was placed in an environment that gave me the confidence to give a central role to film in my anthropological apprenticeship.

My involvement with Ian Dunlop in the middle of research for my doctorate required a commitment that proved time-consuming. In addition to spending longer in the field than I otherwise would have done, on my return from the field Ian gave Frances and me the opportunity to document the footage in Film Australia’s studios in Sydney. Ian’s method of filmmaking involved an initial documentation process in which he went through the material with Yolngu participants and then re-documented it again where possible with his anthropological consultants. This meant that in addition to providing assistance to Ian we were both able to review the material again and again, and have access to supplementary ethnographic data from different participants. I found this a very exciting opportunity and had little doubt that it would enable me to write a much better, if somewhat delayed, thesis. My supervisor, Anthony Forge, although he remained very supportive, was less certain. During the filming of the Djungguwan ceremony, which took place towards the end of my second field trip, I received occasional messages ordering me to return from the field, which I was able to quietly ignore. And back in Canberra our trips to Sydney caused raised eyebrows; however, the fact that Anthony was so strongly engaged with the ethnographic film scene in Canberra gave me the confidence not to be too concerned about his occasional voiced disapproval of the priorities I set myself.

The slight tension over priorities continued after my thesis on Yolngu art was completed. I was fortunate enough to get a short-term teaching position at The Australian National University, which eventually became permanent. One of the films that Ian had completed first was the film made of the child’s funeral that intervened in the preparation for the Djungguwan ceremony. I had documented the ceremony in great detail at the time, it was relatively self-contained and I sensed that I had developed a real understanding of it as an event. Ian’s film Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’wuy captured the sense of the ritual as a whole as well as its emotional intensity.32

32 Dunlop, I. 1979, Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’wuy, Film Australia, Sydney.
Yolngu mortuary rituals provide a context in which, in as much as it is possible, the ‘society’ reveals its structure to itself. In his field notes of 29 July 1937, Donald Thomson wrote, ‘if a man could but follow all that takes place when a yarkomirri [yäkumirri “important”; lit. “name-having”] man dies he would understand almost all of the culture of these people’. Thomson exaggerates somewhat and in the case of the Madarrpa funeral it was the burial of an infant—an event of much less significance. Nonetheless, I felt that the film could be used to illustrate fundamental features of Yolngu society and ritual. The film was divided into two forty-five-minute segments and recorded a public event that Yolngu were happy to see screened to open audiences. Ian saw its potential use in teaching and I had the idea of writing an accompanying monograph. Again, Anthony Forge was not sure that I had my priorities right. He did not think that a book of the film would enhance my career and felt that I should begin immediately to convert my thesis on Yolngu art into a book; however, the atmosphere of those Friday-evening film screenings won out. Tim Asch was a strong advocate for producing monographs to accompany ethnographic films and strongly supported me in my endeavour. The result was the publication of my first book, *Journey to the Crocodile’s Nest: An accompanying monograph to the film Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’wuy*.

**Ethnographic Film and Anthropology**

In the 1970s I found myself on the edge of a network of practitioners who were creating ethnographic film in its contemporary form. There had been an earlier history of significant advocates for the use of film in anthropological research, in particular Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. But by the 1960s there were signs that a discipline or body of practice was emerging: in France with Rouch; in the United States with Marshall, Gardner, Asch and the MacDougalls; and in Australia with Sandall and Dunlop. In addition, Colin Young appeared almost as a magician, acting as a catalyst in bringing people together and creating teaching programs for students that provided institutional entry points into a possible profession. Colin Young had become Dean of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1964 and subsequently became the foundation director of the British National Film School. According to MacDougall, who was one of his students at UCLA, Young’s idea was to ‘bring anthropology and film students together for a year and expose them to one another’s disciplines’ and to teach people new skills they could take back to

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34 Published in 1984 by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.
their own disciplines.\textsuperscript{35} It was uncertain precisely what kind of relationship would develop between film and anthropology and controversies over whether one was subordinate to the other raged for a time.\textsuperscript{36} Film has the potential to contribute to most areas of anthropology. But perhaps—and here I am showing my own biases—a synergistic relationship developed between those interested in film and those interested in materiality and expressive culture: on the one hand in art, in performance, in the aesthetics of the environment, and on the other hand in ways of being. These synergies between ethnographic film and a focus on the material world enabled a discipline of visual anthropology to grow in such a way that the component interests within it tended towards mutual reinforcement. Visual anthropology had been the apprehension of Mead and Bateson and in subsequent years has become an increasingly important segment of the discipline.\textsuperscript{37}

Ethnographic film since the 1960s has become a core part of the field of visual anthropology as well as being a genre of filmmaking in its own right. I would argue that the inclusion of film within this growing field can make it a more central part of the discipline of anthropology as a whole rather than reducing its potential to contribute in innovative ways. The opposition that is sometimes proposed between film as a methodological tool for anthropology and film as a medium of artistic expression is false. It fails to see different media as relatively autonomous bodies of knowledge, practice and expertise with the capacity to contribute in unique ways to theoretical understanding 'and be fully appreciated as modes of inquiry in their own right'.\textsuperscript{38} Different media can convey ideas and understandings about people and events by utilising their own communicative potentials and expressive properties. Film’s contribution to anthropology in the work of filmmakers such as Gardner, Rouch and the MacDougalls has been partly through their understanding of the potential of film independent of the particular disciplinary context.\textsuperscript{39}

\section*{Conclusion}

My entanglement with ethnographic film during my apprenticeship as an anthropologist had a profound and beneficial influence on my subsequent career.

\textsuperscript{35} MacDougall, ‘Colin Young, ethnographic film and the film culture of the 1960s’, pp. 83–4.
\textsuperscript{38} Grimshaw, ‘The bellwether ewe’, p. 256.
Becoming a Visual Anthropologist

My work with Ian Dunlop gave me access to an exceptional resource to study Yolngu ritual in depth. Engagement with the MacDougalls and the Aschs enabled me to understand the value of film in teaching and research in anthropology. I was able to learn much about filmmaking as a participant observer to the extent to which, in the absence of Ian Dunlop, I could be called upon by Yolngu to help to continue to add to the visual archive of their society. Film became relevant to many of the key debates in anthropology over the subsequent decades, on the nature of representation, on the authority of the anthropologist, on the agency of the Indigenous subjects, on the role of aesthetics and the senses in the social life and many other topics. My interest in film enabled me to enter many of these debates; however, perhaps more than anything else my involvement has enabled me to understand the frustrations of anthropological filmmakers with the failure of the discipline to recognise the potential of film in anthropological research in communicating ideas and a sense of being in the world across cultures.

Making ethnographic or anthropological films has been until recently a very expensive project in both time and money. It has existed in a domain of academic research and production that has only relatively recently been fully acknowledged—that of practice-led research. Ethnographic filmmakers have to develop an aptitude in the art of filmmaking as well as being able to participate in the intellectual discourse of anthropology. At the same time it has until recently been difficult to fit film into anthropological teaching practice. The logistics of incorporating film in teaching programs was not easy and required lecturers who would put considerable efforts into structuring classes around them, providing supplementary information and working through the material themselves. Producing and using film in anthropology required skill sets that most anthropologists did not possess. This is not surprising since it applies across most academic disciplines in which practice is dominated by writing and the production of texts. Film was also perhaps too closely associated with pleasure and entertainment—something that could occasionally be substituted for a lecture to ease the burden on the lecturer and provide relief for the students. It almost follows on from that that the production of film was devalued in academic terms and its practitioners were not given the credit for work that flowed to others through monographs and journal articles. And yet anthropological film has over time survived and grown and the digital revolution that has taken place in recent years has opened up unprecedented possibilities for its inclusion in research and teaching.

40 In 2003 I was asked to film the burial ceremony of a leading member of the Madarrpa clan. Yolngu knew that I had worked closely with Ian Dunlop and thought that I might be able to organise a film crew to come to Yilpara on Blue Mud Bay. Unfortunately it was impossible to organise anything in the time available so I volunteered to film the event myself. I have subsequently made a number of films working with Philippa Deveson as editor, including In Gentle Hands (Morphy, H. and Deveson, P. 2008, The Australian National University, Canberra).
There is still a long way to go before anthropology fully recognises film as being the equal of text and is able to use its potential as both a medium of communication and a mode of inquiry. While new technology does not in itself result in conceptual change, developments in digital technology have created a revolution in communication that has in many respects advantaged the visual. Student interest in film has perhaps always been ahead of faculty. Today we are moving into an environment in which students’ capacity to use digital media and see its potential is in advance of many of their teachers’. Film and photography are becoming media for everyday communication. The hope is that the body of knowledge and understanding that developed with the practice of ethnographic film when its potential was unseen by the discipline are brought into the present and integrated fully within contemporary anthropological discourse.
The Ethnographic Filmmaking of Ian Dunlop in a Decade of Change

Philippa Deveson with Ian Dunlop

Introduction

In 1979 Ian Dunlop produced a paper covering the first seventy years of ethnographic filmmaking in Australia.1 This was a period of significant achievement, starting as it did with the first ethnographic footage shot on location anywhere in the world—on Alfred Cort Haddon’s expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898, and by Baldwin Spencer in central Australia, in 1901.

Dunlop drew his history to a close with the films of Aboriginal ceremonies shot by Roger Sandall for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in the 1960s, feeling that these marked the end of an era in Australian ethnographic film. In his final paragraph, he was prescient in anticipating that films being made from the end of the 1960s and beyond would be different in a number of important ways: while the subject matter of early ethnographic films had been ‘predominantly that of traditional Aboriginal life’, films were now being made about ‘societies in change’; there was now ‘a much closer co-operation…between the film-maker and the people being filmed’; and new recording technologies were making a more intimate engagement with people possible.2

This paper will examine the way that Dunlop’s own ethnographic filmmaking evolved over a critical period of about ten years from around the mid-1960s. His early films, particularly the major series he made in the Australian Western Desert in the mid-1960s, did indeed focus on traditional life. But from the end of the 1960s his work articulated, to greater and lesser degrees, with radical developments taking place in ethnographic film both in Australia and elsewhere in the world. These developments can be seen as forming a backdrop for Dunlop’s filmmaking over that period, as he gradually became aware of the groundbreaking work of filmmakers like Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner, John Marshall, Timothy Asch and David MacDougall. The collaborative nature of

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2 ibid., p. 118.
Dunlop’s later work in northern Australia, however, can also be understood in terms of a career-long sensitivity towards the people he worked with, and his increasing openness to being led by them.

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When Dunlop first started making films, in the 1950s, he was working with 35 mm cameras that were large, heavy and very noisy. Shooting with synchronous sound involved putting the camera in a blimp—a huge soundproof box mounted on a massive tripod. Alongside the blimp, a truckload of sound equipment and one or two sound engineers were required. In other words, if one was shooting a documentary with a small unit in a remote location, it was impossible to shoot sync-sound. At best, some wild sound could be recorded with a wire or (later) tape recorder. So early documentaries tended to have a lot of music in them or background chatter and bird chirps recorded on location—or more likely taken from a sound effects library.

In 1957 Dunlop made his first trip into central Australia when he was recruited to work on a film about the establishment of a remote weather station. The film included some footage of Aboriginal people who were at that time camped near the weather station, but with the 35 mm camera his cameraman was using, Dunlop was severely restricted in filming with them. All the scenes had to be carefully set-up, including a kangaroo hunt where people were asked to throw spears at a dead kangaroo that had been propped up against a tree. But despite the difficulties with arranging them, these scenes reveal an early interest in recording traditional technologies and, apart from the kangaroo hunt, the beginnings of an observational approach to filmmaking. More importantly this contact with Western Desert Aborigines and the realisation that there were still people living a traditional hunter-gatherer life in the desert started Dunlop on a decade-long quest to return to the Western Desert to film ‘a day in the life of a nomadic family’.

In the meantime, in the early 1960s Dunlop was commissioned to make a film about the work of a government Patrol Officer on the May River in the upper Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. Here Dunlop was again diverted from his central subject by the culture of the indigenous people in the area and his film included sequences of May River women making sago and a *singsing* that was held for the opening of a new *Haus Tamboran*, or traditional ancestral worship house, at Korogo on the middle Sepik. But again he was shooting without sound and one scene of a canoe being paddled through the reeds was augmented in post-production with sounds of paddle splashes made in a bucket.

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3 Dunlop, I. and Gray, J. 1958, *Balloons and Spinifex*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.
4 Dunlop, ‘Ethnographic film-making in Australia’, p. 117.
5 Dunlop, I. 1964, *Along the Sepik*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.
Shooting with synchronous sound became easier during the early 1960s when filmmakers and technicians working in France and the United States developed self-blimped (sound-insulated) 16 mm cameras, which were small enough to hand hold. At the same time the Nagra tape recorder was developed in Switzerland and unwieldy sound equipment was condensed into a tape recorder that a sound-recordist could carry over their shoulder. As Dunlop reflects, the implications of all this were enormous: 'You could now shoot synchronous sound in the remotest location, you could film conversations, you could interview people, you could hear them breathing and singing and shouting. You could hear the ping of an arrow being fired!'

When Dunlop finally got the go-ahead to return to the Western Desert in 1965, 16 mm sync-sound was still in its infancy and only a handful of Commonwealth Film Unit cameramen had any experience with the new 16 mm cameras. Dunlop elected to use 35 mm black and white. In a paper given at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Round Table on Ethnographic Film in the Pacific Area in 1966, he outlined his reasoning:

> Should we shoot in 35 or 16mm; colour or black and white? 35mm colour was out because of expense. I decided on 35mm black and white, why? As far as an ethnographic record was concerned I thought I was unlikely to shoot subjects where colour was significant. I anticipated no ceremonies and little or no decoration. I hoped to concentrate mainly on close-ups of people carrying out activities of daily life, dark skinned people against a light background, dark shadows. For this I thought black and white would give a clearer picture. Also black and white would be faster for night shooting, and less sensitive to heat during the day. Furthermore I wanted to make a visually satisfying film, if I could, and for this I thought black and white was the medium to use.

> Why 35mm? I wanted to get the best possible quality even if it did mean extra work.

So Dunlop was concerned to get the best possible technical results at the same time as making an aesthetically pleasing film.

As a result of his decision to stick with a 35 mm camera, Dunlop was once again recording without sound, but when it came to editing the *People of the*
Australian Western Desert series and the more general film Desert People, he did not want to pollute the material with sound effects from a sound library. These films are completely silent apart from Dunlop’s own voice-over commentary, and even this was kept to a minimum—limited, as it was, to simple factual statements.

![Image](https://example.com/image.jpg)

**Figure 1** Ian Dunlop and cameraman Richard Tucker filming Minma and his family on the move from one well to another in 1965

Source: *People of the Australian Western Desert*, 1966 (© NFSA, Film Australia Collection)

The Western Desert films are the first of Dunlop’s films that can be described as ethnographic, but they are generally seen as belonging very firmly within that era of ‘films about traditional Aboriginal life’, which Dunlop covered in his 1979 paper. Howard Morphy argues that Dunlop’s production decisions place the Western Desert films at the ‘high point’ in ‘a style of ethnographic filmmaking that is in continuity with the pioneering films made by Spencer and Gillen in central Australia in 1901’. In keeping with this positioning of the films,

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9 Dunlop, I. 1965, *People of the Australian Western Desert. Parts 1–10*, and *Desert People*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW; and Dunlop, I. 1967, *People of the Australian Western Desert. Parts 11–19*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.

Dunlop admits that the aim was to shoot as if the film unit didn’t exist, with the camera as the ‘eye of God’ looking down upon a pristine environment. He humorously recounts how, during filming, he was constantly brushing out the ripple-sole footprints made by Bob Tonkinson, the young anthropologist who accompanied him on the trip.\footnote{Dunlop, Masterclasses in Ethnographic Film presentation.}

Dunlop recalls that, at this stage in his career, he was not aware of developments that were taking place in the world of ethnographic film overseas. He had seen John Marshall and Robert Gardner’s \textit{The Hunters}\footnote{Marshall, J. and Gardner, R. 1957, \textit{The Hunters}, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.} at university, but didn’t know of their more recent work and had never heard of Jean Rouch,\footnote{Dunlop, I., Personal communication, 8 November 2011.} the French filmmaker considered by many to be the pioneer of modern ethnographic filmmaking.\footnote{A champion of participatory filmmaking from the late 1940s onwards, Rouch had a huge impact on the world of ethnographic film, particularly with the groundbreaking reflexivity of \textit{Chronique d’un Été}, the film he made with sociologist Edgar Morin about modern life in Paris: Rouch, J. and Morin, E. 1961, \textit{Chronique d’un Été}, Agros Films, France.}

It could be argued, however, that Dunlop was pioneering his own new approach with his Western Desert films. As Morphy says:

\begin{quote}
Dunlop’s filmmaking differed from his amateur predecessors—eg., Spencer and Gillen, Norman Tindale and T. G. H. Strehlow—not only in a technical and filmmaking sense, but also in his attitude to and understanding of Aboriginal society and its historical position. This difference comes across in the films most directly in the commentary, but also in those subtle features of film style, which makes people write that they present a humanistic vision.\footnote{Morphy, ‘The aesthetics of communication and the communication of cultural aesthetics’, p. 65.}
\end{quote}

Dunlop’s ‘humanistic vision’ is conveyed most clearly in the way he talks about the people he filmed in the Western Desert. Where earlier ethnographic films treated people as anthropological archetypes, Dunlop’s films give them a dignity as individual human beings—by using their names.

The films were extremely well received, as Dunlop’s production decisions were perceived to be in keeping with each other and with an overarching aesthetic purity: ‘The simplicity of the shots and the preciseness of the contrasts are only rivaled by the understatement of the commentary. The absence of music or any other form of background sound, gives evidence of a profound modesty joined with effectiveness.’\footnote{Téchiné, A. 1967, quoted in ibid., p. 65.}
Looking back, however, Dunlop now acknowledges that in 1967, on his second trip to the Western Desert, he should have switched to 16 mm film with sync-sound. He now feels that not having done so was a mistake—made partly because *Desert People*, the general film he had edited from the earlier material, had been such a huge success overseas.18

About the same time as Dunlop was filming in the Western Desert, Cecil Holmes filmed four Arnhem Land ceremonies, three of them with synchronous sound equipment—a first for Australian ethnographic film.19 But these films were not a radical departure from the past in terms of subject matter. Funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), they fitted into a program of anthropological record making that sought to preserve cultural knowledge thought to be in danger of disappearing. With the formation of the institute’s own film unit in 1965, the project of recording Aboriginal ceremonies was carried forward by filmmaker Roger Sandall, who produced six films of ceremonies between 1966 and 1968.20

Both Holmes’ and Sandall’s films of the 1960s used sync-sound, but they were not subtitled. While Sandall went on to make groundbreaking subtitled films like *Coniston Muster* in the 1970s,21 he explained that, with these early record films, only partial fragments of speech were captured and he considered the words of the songs recorded to be too ‘esoteric and repetitious to be comprehensible to outsiders’.22

The first ethnographic films to be subtitled were produced overseas. These were Timothy Asch and John Marshall’s ‘sequence films’ of the mid to late 1960s, each featuring a particular event recorded by Marshall amongst Ju/'hoansi in the Kalahari, but, as they were designed for use in teaching, they were not widely screened. In 1970, Asch went on to produce *The Feast* and other films about the Yanomamó of Venezuela that were also subtitled—although, again, Dunlop would not have seen these until at least the mid-1970s.

17 Dunlop, Personal communication, 8 November 2011.
18 Following a glowing review in *Le Monde* (4 March 1967, p. 20), *Desert People* was screened every night for a week to packed houses at the Cinématèque Française.
Dunlop was only exposed to the ideas and films of people like Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner and Colin Young in 1966, when the UNESCO Round Table on Ethnographic Film in the Pacific Area was held in Sydney. And it was not until 1972, when Dunlop saw David MacDougall’s *To Live with Herds* at the Venice Film Festival, that he realised the full impact that subtitling could have. He still recalls being ‘bowled over’ by it.\(^{23}\)

Thirty years down the track, in 1995, MacDougall reflected on the transformation that had taken place from earlier films with voice-over commentary to films with synchronous sound and subtitling: ‘Audiences no longer listened to spoken information about people in these films but began to watch and listen to them more directly.’\(^{24}\) They had, to some extent, been given a voice.

Although Dunlop claims not to have fully appreciated the powerful effect that subtitling could have until he saw *To Live with Herds* in 1972, he had himself been working with synchronous sound since 1969—and was also already thinking in terms of subtitling people’s speech.

In 1969, Dunlop and a small film crew used a 16 mm camera and Nagra tape recorder to film male initiation ceremonies of the Baruya people in the New Guinea Highlands. But after two years of editing, when French anthropologist Maurice Godelier and linguist Dick Lloyd were flown to Sydney to help with subtitling the Baruya films, they discovered they were unable to deliver accurate translations of dialogue without the aid of a Baruya consultant. Dunlop had to give up the idea of subtitling the films, which he says was a bitter blow,\(^{25}\) and the series of nine films, *Towards Baruya Manhood*, was completed in 1972 without subtitles.\(^{26}\)

At the same time as he was working on the Baruya films, Dunlop began another project in Australia—this time in northeast Arnhem Land. In 1969 he had been asked to make a film documenting the impact of the new NABALCO bauxite mine on the Yolngu Aboriginal community at Yirrkala. He made a preliminary research trip to Yirrkala in February 1970, and returned with a film crew in August of the same year.

They were using 16 mm colour but once again Dunlop was worried about the cost and quality of the colour stock. In a report on the film project, written in 1971, he says:

\(^{23}\) Dunlop, I., Personal communication, 24 August 2011.
\(^{24}\) Here and elsewhere, however, MacDougall expressed some reservations about the way in which the ability to incorporate synchronous, subtitled dialogue led to an overemphasis on the spoken word in ethnographic films: MacDougall, ‘Subtitling ethnographic films’, p. 175.
\(^{25}\) Dunlop, I., Personal communication, 10 January 2012.
\(^{26}\) Dunlop has had recent discussions with French anthropologist Pierre Lemonnier at the Centre de Recherche et de Documentation sur l’Océanie in Marseille about the possibility of finally correcting this omission, with a digitised version of the material.
The first trip was shot in Ektachrome 7242. I have considered whether we should change to B/W stock, partly for economy, and partly because it would give greater latitude for shooting under bad light conditions. On the other hand colour is of course becoming more and more the accepted stock for everything. I frankly have not resolved this in my own mind yet.27

Once again, he was filming with a view to translating and subtitling dialogue, but the results of this were not seen until many years later. What had begun as an idea for a single film evolved into a long-term film project that continued over eight filming trips until 1982. The first film to come out of the project was released in 197928 and the subtitling and commentary in this and all the films that followed were the result of years in the cutting room working with Yolngu informants, anthropologists and linguists.29

Dunlop had gone to Yirrkala wanting to adopt a new approach to his filming with people—and wanting to establish a real collaboration with Yolngu. His research trip diary records how, during his first few days at Yirrkala, he had tried to explain some of his ideas to the President of the Yirrkala Village Council, Roy Dadaynga Marika: ‘Then I had a long talk to Roy. It is hard to say how much he really understood about the idea of the film.’30

Further into the diary, an account of a meeting with anthropologist Nancy Williams (later employed as anthropologist to the project) reveals how his ideas were evolving:

Nancy agreed very much with the idea of trying to get people to tell us what they thought we should film. This was the new approach to Anthropology. It incorporated the active co-operation of your subject. I suggested the first filming might be a meeting of the [Yirrkala Village] Council discussing what we should film.31

The entry is fascinating from the point of view of speculation about the influence that mainstream anthropology may or may not have been having on Dunlop, or ethnographic film more generally, at that time. As Morphy suggests:

The Western Desert films were made at the time of paradigm change in which ethnographic filmmaking began to move away from an objectivist recording of cultures to one in which the filmmaker acknowledged

28 Dunlop, I. 1979, *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’way*, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.
29 The last of the twenty-two films to come out of the project was released in 1996.
31 ibid., p. 6.
a more interactive role in the documentary process. This change of perspective is often said to be associated with more general changes in anthropology with the overturning of the functionalist paradigm, the realization of the constructed nature of ethnographic writing, and a move to more historically positioned and less bounded views of social and cultural processes.\(^{32}\)

Although, as Morphy is also aware: ‘it has been argued that some of the changes that occurred in anthropology were foregrounded in developments in ethnographic film.’\(^ {33}\)

A few days after introducing the idea of the film project to Roy Marika, Dunlop was directed to a meeting of the Village Council where Roy was continuing the discussion:

I went to Roy’s house. A young woman planting in the garden two houses down, said Roy was at a council meeting and they were waiting for me, so I rushed down to Yinitjuwa’s house where on the balcony Roy was holding council with about eight other men and Nancy Williams was sitting in as assistant secretary of the council.

Roy then said ‘Well Ian we held a council meeting yesterday about the film’ and he then proceeded to give an exposition of the film as he saw it and it was an astonishing performance. He explained the purpose of the film, as in fact I conceive it, very much better than I could have done, and here I was worrying that I had not made myself clear and that they had the wrong end of the stick. He drew one circle that was the aboriginal culture and then another and that was the mission and then another large oblong and that was the mine. Then he explained how there was interaction between all these, one with another and much more, which I can’t exactly remember.\(^ {34}\)

Given Roy’s apparently instant grasp of what the project could be, it was easy for Dunlop to continue on the journey he had begun—with the more personal and respectful approach of the Western Desert films—to a much closer collaboration with some of the people he got to know over the years at Yirrkala. And although it is clear that Nancy Williams recognised anthropological parallels and was sympathetic with the direction in which Dunlop was moving, it is also easy to see how his approach at Yirrkala was perhaps more the result of his natural inclination and the response of Yolngu to the project than the result of any strong influences from either anthropologists or other filmmakers. As Dunlop

\(^{32}\) Morphy, ‘The aesthetics of communication and the communication of cultural aesthetics’, p. 65.

\(^{33}\) ibid.

\(^{34}\) Dunlop, *Diary and Daily Notes of Research Visit to Yirrkala, February 1970*, pp. 8–9.
now recalls, the ethnographic films he saw around this time—at the UNESCO Round Table in 1966 and the Venice Film Festival in 1972—simply backed up his feeling that these were the kinds of films he wanted to make.\textsuperscript{35}

When Dunlop returned to Yirrkala to begin shooting later in 1970, he began, as he had thought he might, by arranging to film another Village Council meeting. And, for the first time, Dunlop was happy to be included within the camera’s frame, expressing his hope that this would be a truly collaborative project:

We want this film to be not just a film which we make, but a film which we all make together. We want you to help us with this film—we want you to advise us—tell us the kind of things you think should be filmed—so that everybody feels that it’s not just us making the film, but we’re all working together.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{Figure 2} Ian Dunlop talking to Council President, Roy Marika, and other clan leaders at the Yirrkala Village Council meeting in 1970

Source: Yirrkala Film Project, 1970 (© NFSA, Film Australia Collection)

Only small sections of the council meeting were filmed—just enough to offer representative shots of each of the clan elders who spoke—about half-an-hour

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\textsuperscript{35} Dunlop, Personal communication, 8 November 2011.

\textsuperscript{36} Ian Dunlop speech in Dunlop, I. 1995, \textit{Pain for this Land}, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.
in total; however, an audio recording of almost the entire meeting was made. Some years later this was translated by Wandjuk Marika, who had been present at the meeting and so had a fairly good idea of what people had talked about.

The transcript of Wandjuk’s translation makes fascinating reading. It reveals that, from the very first filming that took place, the clan elders assembled seized the opportunity to record a message for future generations of Yolngu. Mungurrawuy Yunupingu (father of Galarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu) started with the following statement:

> We are here just a short time before we pass away and they are filming us and we are looking at them face to face but one day we are going to pass away. We don’t know what they will do after that. This is our first good opportunity to tell the story to our children through our picture, our film of the Film Unit.\(^{37}\)

Milirrpum Marika, in whose name Australia’s first land rights case was being fought, then spoke directly to his children:

> We want to tell you about this story before they build the township of Nhulunbuy [the new mining town]. We tell you first and we teach you first what the old people, what our own law is, before the new law comes in, so you can know and hear our voices from every clan and you see us on this film what we have been discussing, and put the law through, our law through this picture, the movie…through this machine…We are telling you, as your father’s father’s forefathers did, now we are carrying on and we take the word as before and now this is our time, we are going to talk to you before we pass away and we never know what might happen.\(^{39}\)

In retrospect, Council President, Roy Marika (Milirrpum’s younger brother), was extraordinarily conscious of their joint reflexive purpose:

> Thanks to you people. It’s very good indeed, and one day I’m going to write a letter to the Commonwealth Film Unit so they will send a copy of the tape here so you can hear your voice and what you have been discussing and making law. It is law now. This is a good thing for us, to

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\(^{37}\) Council Meeting Translation, Ian Dunlop Collection, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, p. 14.

\(^{38}\) Known as the Gove Land Rights case, ‘Milirrpum v Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia’ was an attempt to stop the development of the NABALCO bauxite mine and the service town of Nhulunbuy.

\(^{39}\) Council Meeting Translation, Ian Dunlop Collection, pp. 57–8.
remind (everyone of) all your voices, so I’m going to put your voice in the Council House for your children’s children when they have grown up.\textsuperscript{40}

Several of the clan elders talked about ceremonies they were holding, or about to hold, and expressed their agreement that the public parts of these could be filmed. Dunlop had not gone to Yirrkala to film ceremonies and, at that time, wouldn’t have had much idea of their significance there. But Yolngu may have been expecting him to film ceremonies—because this was what previous filmmakers had done—and without doubt they also wanted this to happen, as we hear Roy Marika say in \textit{Pain for this Land}:

\begin{quote}
This is our chance to record our history
for our children…and our grandchildren…
Before we die we should make a true picture,
our own Yolngu picture, that will teach our
children our dances and Law and everything—
our singing—our own Yolngu culture.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Because he was trying to get a general feel of the place by filming a bit of everything, Dunlop’s coverage of ceremonies on this first trip to Yirrkala was very patchy. In addition, constraints of budget, and hence film stock, meant that he was not able to commit himself to a full cover of ceremonies.

In his report on the film project in 1971, he outlined a clear list of reasons why some filming of ceremonial life was essential:

\begin{itemize}
\item a) It is a very important part of life at Yirrkala.
\item b) It should be filmed for the record.
\item c) The Aborigines want and expect it to be filmed.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{itemize}

The last of these points was borne out as the film project continued, with Yolngu requesting the filming of major ceremonies in 1971, 1972 and 1976.

In 1971, the filming of a Djangkawu ceremony in colour was to be partly financed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies’ recording program. Dunlop started filming despite the institute’s sudden and mistaken decision that a Djangkawu ceremony had already been filmed in 1966 and that this would simply be a repeat performance.\textsuperscript{43} Dunlop continued to cover the ceremony as fully as possible despite a telegram telling him that he must stop, as he recorded

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\textsuperscript{40} ibid., pp. 47–8. The films were never kept in the council house, but are now housed by the Mulka Project, a new-media keeping place at the Yirrkala arts centre.

\textsuperscript{41} Subtitles from Dunlop, \textit{Pain for this Land}.

\textsuperscript{42} Dunlop, \textit{YIRRKALA}, pp. 4–5.

\textsuperscript{43} Roger Sandall’s film \textit{Djungguan of Yirrkala} (1966, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra) recorded a Djungguwan ceremony, not a Djangkawu ceremony.
in his diary: ‘Institute of Aboriginal Studies cancel shooting of Djunguwal ritual stop please return stock allotted to this project stop.’ Somewhat wryly, he concluded: ‘So we’ll have to decide whether we received this telegram or not.’ Fortunately, Dunlop decided he hadn’t received the telegram and continued shooting (with institute stock) until the conclusion of the ceremony.

In fact, in 1976, Dunlop was invited to film a Djungguwan ceremony, the ‘same’ ceremony that Roger Sandall had filmed in 1966. But every Yolngu ceremony is a unique event. Indeed, Dunlop’s film brought out the particular purpose of the 1976 performance and the meaning it had for the people involved. As David MacDougall observes: ‘Sandall’s work tends to emphasize the spatial relationships and choreography of the rituals. Dunlop’s looks more closely at the role of ritual leaders and translates more of the conversations and song texts.’

The 1976 film incorporates one of the discussions that took place around the decision to ‘open’ the Djungguwan to being filmed, where we learn of another key motivation for Yolngu involvement with the film project.

MITHILI: We are not going to hide our sacred Law… but bring it out into the open. We’ve spoken about this before… so think about my words… That’s why we’ve moved back here on to our own land… to show that our foundation is in this country… our dancing and singing and sacred Law… this is our home. Now when whites or Government come here… They’ll see for themselves and understand… about our land and our sacred Law.

View Discussion Sequence from Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy

Unlike earlier ethnographic films recording ritual and other aspects of traditional life, the Yirrkala Film Project was conceived to document the impact of the NABALCO bauxite mine on the Aboriginal community at Yirrkala. The Yolngu response to the film project can be seen as part of their response to the threat that the mine and new mining town, just twenty kilometres from Yirrkala, held for them; and later, to the losing of their land rights case. In April 1971, Justice

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44 Dunlop, I. 1971, *Yirrkala Diary*, Ian Dunlop Collection, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, p. 28.
45 ibid.
46 Dunlop, I. 1989, *Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy*, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.
48 Subtitles from Dunlop, *Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy*.
Blackburn handed down his ruling in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory that Australia had been *terra nullius* (or ‘land belonging to no-one’) before European settlement, and that Yolngu did not own their land.

In the council meeting that Dunlop recorded, Yolngu were expressing their feeling that they should make a record of their ‘dances and Law and everything’—especially, as Mungurrawuy said, ‘before we pass away and we never know what might happen’. But there was more to it than this. Right from the beginning of the film project, and with even more urgency following the loss of their court case, some Yolngu clearly saw the potential of film for educating European Australians about their connection to their land.

So, although ostensibly just another film of an Aboriginal ceremony, the film of the Djungguwan ceremony that Dunlop and his crew shot at the Marrakulu clan homeland settlement of Gurka’wuy in 1976 also operates as a statement of Yolngu rights to land—informing the wider world about the Marrakulu clan’s connection to Gurka’wuy.

During the filming of the ceremony, Dunlop asked Dundiwuy Wanambi to explain the ritual significance of the trees and rocks along the beach at Gurka’wuy. He still relives what happened as a magical moment: at the end of the beach, at the very spot where Djerrka, the water goanna ancestors, came ashore and gave this tract of land to the Marrakulu clan, Dundiwuy picked up a stick and began drawing the design of a Marrakulu clan Djerrka painting on the wet sand—his clan’s title deeds to the very place where they were standing. Dunlop feels it is one of the most powerful statements of land rights that he has ever filmed.50

View Dundiwuy Drawing in the Sand Sequence from *Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy*51

**Conclusion**

Looking back at the decade of change through which Dunlop’s approach to filmmaking evolved, it is possible to see that the films he produced were more a response to an engagement with people—and their response to his filming—than to the radical developments in ethnographic film that were going on around him. Dunlop’s work can be seen to have taken place on the fringe of

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50 Dunlop, I. 1997, Personal communication.
developments overseas and, perhaps for this reason, while aware of these, he
was not driven by any strong theoretical positions or new orthodoxies that can
be seen to have developed around ethnographic filmmaking at this time.

Dunlop was slow to take up the new technologies of more portable 16 mm
cameras and synchronous sound-recording equipment, preferring a conservative
approach in the interests of getting the best-quality pictures he could. He
wanted to do full justice to what he knew would be the last opportunity to film
people living in the Western Desert; however, he has been criticised for having
missed an early opportunity to record people’s voices, and now acknowledges
his mistake in not having switched to using a lighter weight camera and Nagra
recorder on his second trip to the desert.

Dunlop was at pains to hide any signs of the presence of a film crew in his
Western Desert films and, again, he has been criticised for this lack of
reflexivity. Following Rouch, other ethnographic filmmakers of the time were
at pains to reveal the constructed nature of their films; but Dunlop’s approach
was in keeping with his enormous respect for the people he was filming and
his, admittedly romantic, feeling for the stark beauty of their life in the desert.

Given the chance to pursue his dream of making a film on the life of Western
Desert nomads, Dunlop had approached his subject with his own particular
sensibility and a sensitivity that was unknown in earlier anthropological films,
and his People of the Australian Western Desert series remains a document of
enormous integrity and value. Anthropologist Sue Davenport, who works at
Balgo on the northern edge of the Tanami and Great Sandy deserts in Western
Australia, recently told Dunlop that, these days, before old men from the
community take young boys out bush to teach them about the old ways, they sit
down and watch Dunlop’s films to remind themselves of how they used to live.

Dunlop did take up recording with synchronous sound from 1969, in the
highlands of Papua New Guinea and at Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land. But
his aim of subtitling his Towards Baruya Manhood films was thwarted by the
difficulty of getting the language of so remote a people translated. And, while
the twenty-two films that came out of the Yirrkala Film Project were all fully
subtitled, they were not released until many years after this breakthrough of
modern ethnographic film had made its mark.

While the films of ceremonies that Dunlop made at Yirrkala could be seen to
continue a tired tradition of anthropological record making, they again are

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52 Bryson, I. et al. 2000, as cited in Morphy, ‘The aesthetics of communication and the communication of
cultural aesthetics’, p. 65.
53 Tuareg, M. 1984, as cited in ibid., p. 65.
54 Dunlop, I. 2009, Personal communication.
quite different from what had gone before. They were made at the request of Yolngu, who wanted their ceremonies recorded as a means of educating both their children and the wider world.

In her foreword to the book *Yalangbara—Art of the Djang’kawu*, Banduk Marika compares her Rirratjingu clan’s paintings with Dunlop’s film of her clan’s ceremony. She says: ‘In a way, Yalangbara is like the film about my father, *In Memory of Mawalan*, in showing people that this is our land, these are our ancestors and they are important for Aboriginal people, not just our family.’

This film and many others from the Yirrkala Film Project have acquired the status of artefacts that can be used by Yolngu in much the same way as they might use paintings of their ancestral clan designs. Both the paintings and the films are a statement of a relationship with and, hence, rights to land.

On one of his last trips to Yirrkala, in the mid-1990s, Dunlop was told about a workshop that Yolngu had organised to assess the long-term social, economic and environmental impacts of the NABALCO bauxite mine after twenty-eight years of operation. Wulanybuma Wunungmurra, chairman of what was now a town council, told Dunlop how, the day before the workshop, the council had screened *Pain for this Land*. In the sequence of the Village Council meeting that Dunlop had filmed at the very outset of the film project, those present saw and heard their fathers and grandfathers talking with prophetic foresight about the effect the mine would surely have upon their community and their country. Wulanybuma told Dunlop that people had cried.

View 1970 Council Meeting Sequence from *Pain for this Land*

On the last day of the workshop the General Manager of the mining company was invited to attend. Now that the mine had been going so long there were few white employees who had been there at the beginning or who had any idea what it really meant to the Yolngu then. The workshop organisers sat the General Manager down and screened the film again—and then they told him ‘We still feel much pain for this land’.

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56 Dunlop, *Pain for this Land*.
57 Dunlop, I. 1996, Personal communication.
Discussion between Gary Kildea and David MacDougall about *Celso and Cora*¹

Canberra, May–October 2001

[Note: This discussion is edited from a longer conversation. Asterisks indicate where sections of the conversation have been omitted.]

D: I think our most important objective should be to look at your intentions, because these often don’t come out in discussions of films. They don’t try to find out what the filmmaker was thinking when he or she filmed a scene, or when including it in the film—the reasons for those decisions.

G: Like you say, a lot of discussions and writings about a film don’t take into account the complex intentions behind its making; for that matter, not even the complexities of how it actually played out in the minds of particular viewers at particular screenings.

♬ View Opening Sequence of *Celso and Cora*²

D: First of all, beginnings of films are always crucial. They are filled with difficulty and complexity because they have so many functions to perform for the audience. As a filmmaker, you have many objectives that you have to interlayer or superimpose upon one another as you develop the opening. So let’s just take the first shot of the train approaching through the quarter. I noticed one thing: it simply pops on. It is unconventional in the sense that there is no fade-in of sound or picture. Can you say something about that? It’s a stylistic principle that I think you follow throughout the film.

G: As an opening, I guess what it has going for it is that suddenly there’s this curious thing approaching, ringing a bell and shining a light, all seen through a long lens, then there’s the train tracks with all that busy activity; people crossing. I think, as a shot, it has what it takes to grab an audience.

D: So you wanted the shock of being thrown into the midst of this?

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G: Yes, something that was both, I guess, kind of confusing but still developing. I think that’s what we’re always looking for, both as cinematographers and editors. Whatever else the shot’s doing, it should continue to develop.

D: Isn’t part of the rhetoric here also to establish the kind of pacing we’re to expect in the film? In a sense it’s like the bullfighter training the bull in the ring, to get the correct passes. You have to train your audience how to look at this film. And if you start with a lot of quick shots then they are going to expect quick shots. It seems to me that your resisting cutting away immediately to something else is part of your design—to train us to see this in a particular way.

G: Yes, that’s right.

D: This second shot has a very particular subject, which is children’s games in a fiesta atmosphere. What was it about that shot that made you want to have it here?

G: It was just a nice little piece of community interaction and it gives a sense of playfulness and warmth. It says very succinctly ‘community’. What I’m interested in here is building on the excitement of the first shot. There is a kind of dramatic metaphor there [in the children’s game of piñata] of striving and a failing—‘Nowhere near it’, someone says. But how, being blindfolded, handicapped, can one be expected to succeed? That’s the metaphor.

D: That idea was in your mind at the time?

G: Not while I was shooting it, but in the editing.

D: The idea that people—whatever their ambitions—are under constraints and blindness.

G: Yes, I don’t mind resorting to a ‘natural’ metaphor now and then—one that just falls out of the material.

D: The shot also immediately creates a feeling toward the subjects of some sort of affection.

G: Yes, exactly. It sets up a sense of affection and warmth and the support afforded by a community. In other words, it’s not a negative set-up [designed] to show a slum as a horror place. It doesn’t announce ‘poverty’. It announces community, and joyousness.

D: And I think you’ve said many times before that this was one of your objectives in making the film—not to brand people by their poverty, but to see them in different terms?
G: Yes. Hopefully it attempts to see their poverty more as they see it. It’s not as if they are not angry—and right at the end of the film Celso makes his analysis and does show his anger about it. It’s just that in any given situation, wherever you live, you live in a given set of circumstances, which you adjust to it—sort of. You have to. There’s a nice Tagalog saying, which impressed me when I learnt it: ‘You are much better off having a poor person as a friend than a rich person as a friend.’

D: Do you think it’s possible to think on different levels simultaneously? Can you be thinking on a very abstract level about the structural circumstances of people’s lives and at the same time about the minute details?

G: Yes, those different levels are at play at the same time. As someone interested in pursuing the cinéma-vérité way of knowing and telling, it’s the dramaturgical sense which I’m hoping will be most actively in play, once you get into it. Because, you know, you’re aiming to gather material from which to make a story, a story with universal reach, so any sociological framework tends to drop away. It’s like the formwork into which concrete is poured. It can be taken away after the concrete has hardened.

D: I’d like to ask you about a key point at the very beginning of the film, where you say in your narration that the film is a story constructed from fragments filmed over a period of three months. Those aren’t the exact words. Would you deconstruct those elements, first of all ‘story’, and then ‘constructed from fragments’? Because ‘story’ carries a lot of weight here in relation to how we think about fiction and nonfiction. What was your reason for highlighting the story-ness of the film so strongly?

G: Well, I think it was very much in keeping with the tradition of cinéma-vérité, which, as a movement, would have peaked at least ten years before this, wouldn’t it? Late Sixties, early Seventies. So there was a time there where the construction of a story from fragments was the aim of direct cinema. Rather like what the nonfiction novel In Cold Blood[3] [by Truman Capote] had done for literature. I was very much conscious of these developments at the time, and felt very much engaged in that tradition—the still relatively new tradition of cinéma-vérité. So it was, perhaps, an ethnographic film whose aim was not really to find out what was going on in this other culture, but rather to familiarise the situation through ‘story’, as we understand it, to attempt to make the culture gap transparent.

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By saying it’s a ‘story constructed’, and making it even clearer by having a still picture up there—the out-of-place-looking white filmmaker—it freed me up to go ahead and make narrative sense. By clearly saying ‘This film is constructed from fragments gathered over three months’, it freed me up.

D: Did the statement also free you to use material out of chronology, whereas another documentary filmmaker might feel obliged to present the story in its natural chronology?

G: Yes, that’s right. That’s an important issue. There can sometimes be good reasons to stick to strict chronology. But, on the other hand, a scene being omitted from a strict chronology can easily have a more distorting effect, overall, than scenes that have been reshuffled in time. As it turns out, though, I didn’t need to do that very much. Certainly most of the major events, which are chronologically significant, are as they happened.

D: I find that when I try to put things out of chronology I often gravitate back to the chronology, for all sorts of reasons. In the end, there seems to be a coalescence of a dramatic need and the way things were developing anyway. So, taking things out of position often creates more problems than it solves.

G: Yes, one is seeking the strongest, the most effective, form of documentary and that usually means paying due respect to its core nature, its ontology. For example, putting a commentary over a moving picture is somehow weakening it. Not only is an entirely ‘other’ kind of knowing imposed on the material—one on the scene—but it also introduces a contradictory time sense. There’s the historical time of the shot itself, then there’s this other time of the spoken commentary.

D: Well, it’s similar to music laid over images, which certainly for me violates the value of the moving image.

G: Yes, definitely. Because, after all, almost any piece of music will ‘take’, one way or another, to almost any piece of film. That’s a funny thing. And conversely, no piece of music will ever ‘take’ like that to any kind of slideshow.

D: You also mention quite early on here Rowena’s role in the film. Can you say something about your decision not to work alone but to have her with you? Because you did say that you spoke and understand some Tagalog, but you relied on Rowena for language assistance.4

G: Yes, I started working alone, actually, just getting by with my basic Tagalog. In fact, this is a case where the chronology of the story is more or less correct. All the scenes up to finding the new house were done by me working completely alone. But by that stage, I realised that I’d benefit from: a) having someone help

4 Rowena Katalingkasuan was a local collaborator on the project.
Discussion between Gary Kildea and David MacDougall about Celso and Cora

me with sound, and b) having someone who spoke the language properly. But, like finding the right people to be in the film, finding the right collaborator is a really crucial decision.

D: Did you discuss your objectives with her, so that she had a sense of your thinking at any moment?

G: Yes, I think we would have discussed that a lot. I remember she would spend a lot of her time when we weren’t filming transcribing from the tapes or, rather, writing out a rough translation in English.

D: Do you want to say something now about how you met Celso, how you felt about that, and at what point you made the decision to follow his life?

G: Celso happened to be sitting, one night, on a pavement, with his back propped up against a light pole. I thought that he looked distressed, so I asked him, ‘Are you all right?’

D: Really? He wasn’t selling cigarettes at that time?

G: No, no. He was just a guy sitting on a street with his head on his knees. I just happened to walk past him, and I thought, this guy looks sick. So I leant down and said, ‘Are you all right?’ He just looked up and said, ‘Yes, I’m all right. I’m just sleeping.’ He was very friendly about it. So then we just had a little chat. I told him what I was doing. He said, ‘You must come and meet my wife, she’s just a couple of blocks away from here.’ She was selling there. So that was the luck of the thing.

D: But you were thinking from the beginning about a portrait of someone or some people, and a story of their lives?

G: Yes, it was definitely going to be a film about a family. I got interested in the Philippines through coming to know the Filipino community in Papua New Guinea where I was living at that time. It was in the mid-Seventies. That’s when I started to learn Tagalog without even a thought at the time that I was going to make a film there. I just fell in with the community there. I came to love the Filipino culture and personality. It was 1979 before I finally went to the Philippines and, by then, starting to think about a film. So, by that stage, I’d have had a good five years of exposure and familiarity with Filipino culture.

I was experimenting since the early Seventies with films like with Belong Living, Belong Ol,5 with subtitles and stuff. That’s after I’d come to hear about what you [David MacDougall] and Judith had been doing in Africa. That was when the penny dropped for me about the use of subtitles to open up the world of cinéma-

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vérité for cross-cultural filmmaking. I immediately started experimenting with that and, of course, also with the long take as opposed to traditional montage. I had been very much persuaded to the view—largely through the writing of Bazin—that the ‘ontology of the photographic image’ was the basis of all that is powerful in the cinema. So, *Celso and Cora* was the kind of laboratory where I finally got to work all those things out for myself. I recall that the little book of Bresson’s aphorisms [*Notes on Cinematography*] was like my bible that I’d read whenever I was in doubt. Because, I suppose, he was another of those essentialists in his thinking about the cinema. And, I suppose, since I saw myself as striving to philosophise in an essentially cinematic way, I did cling to those aphorisms of Bresson for guidance.

Anyway, I can remember making a New Year’s resolution that I’d start filming that very day. It was the first of January 1981. I’d been in Manila searching for subjects and procrastinating for a good six weeks by then. I told myself that I’m definitely going to start shooting some film today, for better or for worse, I’m going to do something. I’m not going to ask any more questions. Celso and Cora had already given me their permission so, what the heck, I just decided to take myself and my gear in a taxi right to their neighbourhood. They were living deep inside a rather large squatter area—as you can see early in the film; the shot of the roofs—there are no roads to take you there. The nearest you can get with a taxi is a couple of hundred metres away where there are lots of little alleyways leading inside. But I had so much gear to manage by myself, though I had pared it down as much as I could. I carried three or four 400 ft 16 mm film magazines, spare cans of film, a changing bag, a tripod, the camera itself, separate sound gear—luckily I was using a small Nagra SN—several microphones, including a quite heavy wireless mic system.

So there was I, stumbling along into this squatter area trying to find Celso and Cora, lugging gear boxes and all kinds of stuff. But, for all that, it turned out to be the day on which I filmed everything that ended up being in the first 10 minutes or so of the movie [apart from the pre-title sequence]. Everything up to the point when they arrive at…

D: The new house?

G: Yes, the first scene is in another house, then there’s the walking through the alleyways to their new place, which they were checking out for the first time. So that’s how I finally got launched into the film.

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D: And was there a moment when you said, ‘This is my subject. I know I’m going to make a film about these people from now on’?

G: By then I felt that they were the right people but I was more worried about the house they were living in—that is, their old house: it was virtually impossible to film in, one extremely small room, no windows, no nothing. So it actually turned out quite well. When I finally found their place that day, trundling in with all my gear, I was distraught. After all my efforts to get here and get started, I thought I’d missed them—that they were just not at home. But then somebody told me, ‘Oh no, they’re not here because the landlady told them they can’t stay in this place anymore.’ But then someone offered to go off looking for them and it wasn’t long before they both arrived to greet me. They said, ‘We’ve just been thrown out of our house and we are going to move.’ And so I asked, ‘Can I come with you, then, to see—and film—the place you’re moving to?’

D: What was your feeling about how they would come across to an audience, as people? What was your sense of them? This has to do with a general question of how you cast a documentary, how you choose the people.

G: There’s so much luck involved and, I guess, intuition too. I was quite pleased with the kind of rapport we had from the start, a kind of ease of getting along. That’s a really important concept among Filipinos. There’s a nice Tagalog term, pakikisama, which I don’t think has a precise English equivalent. It refers to getting along well with people. There are very many words based on sama all to do with getting on with others—or not. But anyway we clearly had pakikisama between us, which I took as a really good sign.

D: Was the shot where they discuss the cigarettes actually the first shot?

G: Yes, that was the very first shot of the whole shoot.

D: In terms of exposition, it’s very useful.

G: Yes, extremely useful. And I always love the detailed discussion you get when professionals talk among themselves. In this case it’s the talk of professional cigarette vendors.

D: ‘Philip’—and the other names they have for the cigarettes.

G: Ah, yes, yes. Philip Morris, Winston, Saratoga. They talk in detail about those things just as filmmakers talk about shots, cuts, reverse angles and so on.

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D: So they had a sense of what was interesting to you, as a person?

G: Yes.
D: More than as a filmmaker?

G: Yes, yes I think so. They knew, of course, that my project was filmmaking, that I usually had a large camera on my shoulder, but I don’t think they were helping me out with that especially or being conscious of the expository information I might need or anything.

D: Often it’s more our presence than the camera itself that’s important.

G: And I think, as viewers, we can decode those subtleties fairly accurately. So, all that stuff—the reflexive intrusions, the voice from behind the camera, their references to the camera—I don’t see it as any kind of end in itself. In fact, I don’t particularly like it—it does tend to throw you out of the story, to rob you of a certain enchantment. These things are operating all at once, these notions of what is real and what is false. There is a kind of enchantment we feel when we watch films whether we identify the characters before us as actors, non-actors, semi-actors or caught by a ‘candid camera’, whatever status they might have in that regard.

D: Was there still at that time a sense that this reflexivity, or self-reflexivity, was something fresh—that audiences would gain a greater sense of intimacy by being aware of your presence as a filmmaker while they watch what’s happening?

G: I guess the best way to get the best of both worlds—that is, to allow the enchantment of falling into a story, whilst also offering some clarity about the actual relationships involved; how these scenes have come to be—is by way of these reflexive interventions. For sure, they’re at a cost at the level of enchantment. But I have found that the film quickly recovers from that disturbance, and the enchantment takes over again. This is a very different kind of pleasure than is offered by a fully narrated documentary—that kind of a pleasure born of epistemophilia.

D: Can you say something about the shot in which you walk through the neighbourhood following them to the new house, which obviously accentuates your role? Why was it important to include the whole journey, from the first house to the second?

G: Well, the long take as an ideal was firmly planted in my thinking at the time. Luckily, the walk was just about the right length. It didn’t risk getting boring or anything. And what could be a better way of having the geography of the place established? I can’t imagine a better way…

D: And the ambience?

G: Yes, the ambience, a feel of place. We’d already, by then, got a feel of them as people, and we’d got a feel of them as professionals, i.e., cigarette vendors, and
Discussion between Gary Kildea and David MacDougall about Celso and Cora

also as family, as individual people relating to one other. In retrospect, it was all so lucky. But, as we set off to walk to the new house, the radio mic was on Cora still, as it had been in the first scene in the house. I had only one radio mic and, as I said, I was working alone at that stage. So, I had the radio mic receiver connected to the Nagra SN, in a bag slung over my shoulder, and it was rolling. Actually, when, as she was walking, I heard Cora tell Celso to watch out for me, to ‘Take care of Gary’, I wasn’t particularly happy about it. I figured we’d had enough ‘reflexivity moments’ for a while! I guess I feared…the enchantment level was dropping unduly at that moment but then again there’s that other guy who comes into shot and sort of smiles at the camera, so, in the end, it worked out fine. The very wide-angle prime lens I used for that shot had two added bonuses: 1) it took a lot of the shake out of the walk, and 2) the wide perspective meant that the alley’s enclosing walls flew past the edges of frame helping to make it a more dynamic and dramatic shot.

D: In the new house you do a complete 360-degree turn around the room. It’s an interesting moment when they suddenly realise that you’re filming, or at least Celso does.

G: In that shot he’s saying ‘Ah, so you’re rolling’—as opposed to just checking the frame—but it didn’t seem to faze him one way or another.

D: It offers a kind of proof about the difference between someone’s behaviour when they’re being filmed and their behaviour when they’re being filmed but not thinking about it.

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D: The next segment starts with Cora buying a safety pin and ends with Celso talking about life in the country. This is the next act, in a way, isn’t it, after we’ve been introduced to Placida? Can you talk a bit about this material?

G: Actually that shot was another stroke of luck. I just happened to be filming, hand-held, a wide exterior of the house and through the viewfinder I noticed Cora coming out of the door and starting down the steps. I thought, ‘Wow, that’s great’. It would establish her around the house area. It was a simple shot I thought I needed but was reluctant to ‘direct’. I figured I’d just let her go out of the fixed frame in whatever direction she took. But then she starting coming towards the camera, looking like she...well, I didn’t know where she was going. She kept heading right up to the camera but without paying any attention to me at all. I realised that she had to be heading for the little store immediately to my left. So, with nothing to lose, I followed her as she passed, grabbing at the focus and aperture rings and hoping for the best. So the simple wide shot of
the house had developed into a lovely little scene of Cora trying to buy a safety pin—relating to someone else in the neighbourhood—just a few paces from her own house. So that was just one of those lucky things.

But funnily enough, I don’t think I’d be up to it today. I was thinking that as I was watching it just now…

D: The folly of youth?

G: Yes, the folly of youth. The role of observational cameraperson is, after all, quite intrusive, even if it doesn’t always come across like that. And these people in Manila, I’m sure they didn’t, in their generosity, see it as being as intrusive as I would if someone were to do it to me. That kind of filming requires a certain confidence. It’s a young person’s style, perhaps, a certain assurance that you’re fitting in just fine.

D: Do you think that the fact that you were closer to their age meant that you fitted in as just another person they could include in their conversation?

G: Yes. I think that’s also true. Older people are not going to fit in as well, if for no other reason than they attract more respect.

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View Celso Vending Sequence

D: So we have just seen the section where we are introduced to the Tower Hotel, and we watch Celso selling cigarettes.

G: Their work life is a crucial part, as it is in anyone’s life. So, it was a crucial part of the story.

D: It kicks the film forward when you make a big shift like that, a shift of location or activity. You start off with a new impetus somehow. Is that, in a way, what allows this scene to play out in such natural time? That we have a new interest at this point, and we’re willing to sit back—again—and observe?

G: Yes, maybe you wouldn’t have the patience to sit through it as willingly if it wasn’t a new element in the story. And this is the principle of musical structure, isn’t it, to alter the rhythm, to move through several keys, to juxtapose a slow movement with a fast one. Film has a lot in common with music in its sensuality and its sculpting of time.

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D: Now, there’s a point in this sequence at which Celso shifts from talking to other people, and doing business, to talking to you.

G: What I like about the shot, looking at it now, is that it didn’t seem to matter to him at all whether we were talking to him on camera or not. You can see that when he returns to chat with us again, after he’s done with his various transactions. I think the shot goes on for four minutes or so. I like the way that it just happens to unfold in one shot and the way our question to him is deferred, as it might be in the normal flow of a conversation. But I think our kind of filmmaking has always implied working with people who can regard the filmmaking process as just an adjunct to what’s going on in their lives, not the other way around, where someone wanting to buy cigarettes in the middle of an ‘interview’ might be seen as an unwanted interruption.

D: Another aspect of this, it seems to me, is that at this point the film is shifting toward the kind of special relationship you have with Celso, which develops as the film goes on, and where you really become his confidant. At this point he seems to be taking it upon himself to educate you about life in the Philippines. Whereas before, in the scenes with Cora, it’s different—it’s more that he’s telling you about their lives.

G: Yes. Maybe he’s nudged into that by the kinds of questions we were asking. First, he gives us a generalised answer to the general situation—that is, the everyday oppression of street vendors by police. But then, it’s nice that he goes on to illustrate the point with his own story about refusing to give a ‘special price’ for cigarettes to a cop. Then, by way of demonstration, [he] grabs a handful of candies from his selling tray. That’s the sort of richness of representation that’s peculiar to direct cinema. A unique form of multilayered ‘knowledge’ available right off the screen.

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Many people who watch the film have a lot of trouble with the following scene [where Celso appears to run short of money while buying medicine] because what they see in it or read into it is a kind of callousness on the part of the filmmakers for seeming to stand by and let it all happen.

D: They think you should buy the drugs for him.

G: Yes, of course. It’s not surprising. These kinds of documentary first of all get lived into existence. Following that they get edited into a movie, but then, as the movie is being watched, it is sort of lived into existence again, within each individual who sees it. This is especially true for films that, in their very nature, actively provoke the empathy of the viewer. It’s one’s very soul that gets drawn in to them, right then and there at the time of the projection. So that scene, for
instance, is not easily taken as just a detached report of one minor family crisis somewhere in the world twenty years ago...there is personal investment in the moment so the question can easily arise 'Why don't the filmmakers simply pay for all the medicines now and solve the problem?'—and by doing so discharge the narrational anxiety that the film has provoked. I think it comes down to the deep psychology of the viewing experience.

But maybe it doesn't matter so much that some people misconstrue what's gone on outside the 'constructed story'—taking it as a clear case of callous, exploitative filmmakers. It's preferable, I think, to be misunderstood that way than to attempt self-serving explanations within the film. As it happens, of course, we were providing support to the family but it was necessary to find ways to do that as friends, to avoid getting into the role of patron—that's no way to get on with people.

D: The thing that's quite interesting in the hospital scene is how important words become in evoking the sores that Totoy has, because we don't actually see much of what's going on. But the fact that everything is discussed and described—somehow it's even more powerful than if we had been able to see the sores.

G: Yes, there was a blackout just as they were called in so I was forced to shoot the whole scene as a kind of silhouette against the pale light of a window. But anyway, I don't think it would ever have occurred to me to go in to get shots of those sores—it was the interactions, their body language in relation to the doctor, that seemed most relevant.

D: Here the film shifts into the verbal in such a way that it's more powerful than the visual. The visual begins to happen in our minds, not on the screen. I'm just speaking from the viewpoint of one viewer, of course. But it's interesting how films shift back and forth between the evocation of words and the use of images. Sometimes one's more powerful, sometimes the other's more powerful.

Would you say something about the connections between these three specific scenes? First of all, Celso talking, and then buying materials, and then the building? Do you see them as connected in certain ways?

G: I think it was a three-part exploration of Celso's character. Perhaps one might have thought of splitting them up. But you wouldn't want to split the buying of the timber [from] the making of the house. Those two scenes naturally go together.

D: The scene of Celso talking to you about being streetwise—it's a very nice combination of toughness and vulnerability. He's swaggering a little, but also
it’s true—obviously there’s some truth to it. I think that is borne out almost immediately in the next scene where you see him bargaining, and using all the various means to get the price down and then pad the bill up.

G: Now that I come to think of it, it’s very rare that you’d find a subject for a film like Celso—Cora too, for that matter—who hardly ever wastes a word or a thought. Their talents in verbal communication, as I see it now, seem quite astonishing. I fell on my feet when I found them, didn’t I?

D: There’s a moment in the building scene, isn’t there, when Rowena is given a plate of food? We’ve also seen her earlier when Celso has the confidence to borrow thirty-five centavos from her. Again you pan over, and we see her. Throughout the film you’re quietly establishing her, and the two of you, as a unit.

G: Yes, I hope it can be seen that the principle in play is neither to make a point of showing the filmmakers nor to make a point of not showing them. So when, in the natural flow of things, Celso brings Rowena into it—and sometimes me (but then it’s difficult, because I’ve got the camera in front of my face)—then I just felt happy to include that in the cut. And I think that happens throughout the film, and just enough times in the final cut. So I hope you get the sense that the reflexivity is not added as a fashionable accessory but integrated as part of the film.

D: It’s what I would call deep reflexivity, because it runs right through the film, not only in specific shots like that, but in the way the camera is being handled and its relationship to people throughout. It’s constantly there and constantly modulated and expressed in different ways. So it becomes very much an organic part of the film.

View Cora’s Pig Story Sequence

D: The film goes into Cora’s long monologue talking about the pig story and other things. Well, this is a wonderful story and you’ve kept it intact—the pig story. Obviously it called out to be kept somehow intact in the film.

G: I think that those stories provide so much information at so many levels. Plus, in the whole dramatic shape of the film, there’s a balancing of Celso against Cora; Cora against Celso. It’s rather nice in this sense that he’s there present in that scene but he’s asleep. It’s a nice touch. She can speak freely about him—even refer to ‘him’—even though he is bodily present.

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D: The pig story, in particular, reflects back on Celso’s monologue, because his tenderness toward the pig somehow throws into relief his toughness. This combination of toughness and tenderness is quite well related back and forth, I think, between those two monologues, his and hers.

G: Yes, and that’s all the more reason I was lucky to have had that shot of him. We know the layout of that room by now, which is necessary to clearly establish that he is actually there all along, asleep. It’s rather a nice narrative device arrived at by accident. If you’d thought of it for a fiction film you’d be quite pleased with yourself. I remember holding on him for what I thought was long enough, even though she’d already started into her story. I had to judge just the right moment to pan around onto her.

D: You don’t remind us again that he’s there, do you?

G: No. There was no need. I could have done that but only with a cutaway, which I really wanted to avoid, absolutely—in the whole film. But even using a blank space and then a shot of him asleep it wouldn’t have worked for me. Had it been anything other than a pan then his presence would have been too ‘pointed’. So, as I was taking the shot, getting ready to pan, I remember desperately hoping that whatever Cora was saying as she came into the frame would turn out to be a good beginning for the scene. Because if, for example, I’d decided in the editing that the first minute or even 20 seconds of her talk after the pan was somehow unwarranted then it would have needed a cut to establish Celso sleeping nearby.

D: This indicates the kinds of things you think about when you’re shooting, such as, ‘How is this going to connect?’ ‘Is this the right moment to link things?’

G: Yes, this kind of filming is a bit like playing jazz—more, say, than planning out a composition—it’s a kind of improvisation.

D: That sort of decision can be very calculated, and I think it is sometimes. I know that I sometimes think in a very calculated way—for example, ‘Now, what is the right moment to move?’ But it can also be very intuitive.

G: Yes, yes.

D: But it has to have some organic coherence, if it’s all-of-a-piece. Anyway, I’d like to go back to the content of those three shots. The first is about the story of the pig and Celso’s attachment to the pig. The second is about buying the sticker for the bicycle. And if I’m correct, the third is about Cora wanting to have some sort of fund of money for herself for the things that she cares about. So in terms of content, how do you feel those three things fit together?

G: Yes, they all speak about the relationship between them; her complex attitude towards her husband. Consider the first one—the pig story is all about Celso,
and it’s saying something affectionate about him. It makes for a more complex picture of both of them; her telling of his being so soft-hearted that he’d look after a pig so tenderly. He even refused to eat the meat from it in the end. All that provides a kind of counterpoint to what she says later in the argument scene about her fear of his hands, his fist.

D: That’s interesting, because you can draw a parallel between her love of decorating her surroundings and his love for the pig. It’s two kinds of affection, two kinds of emotion, each particular to each character. So they form a pair.

G: Yes, that’s right. But in the end, it hooks around to the fact of her autonomy being very much hemmed in by the exercise of his masculine role. Later on there’s that point when he says, ‘Would you like me to wear the skirt in the family and you to wear the pants?’

D: For me, it’s very interesting that you allow the whole quarrel to play out in its various permutations and shifts, and we see the way in which each of them is trying to apply moral pressure on the other. It’s the sort of games people play, how people use the rhetoric of the moment to pressure each other.

G: One thing that struck me about the quarrel scene, seeing it again this time, is how lucky I was to have had both a natural beginning and a natural end to it… the ramping up from zero speed, accelerating to full intensity and then down again to stillness at the end, which was crucial to the way it works. And for me, it’s the details such as the way Cora quietly heaves her chest as she sits propped against the wall that remains very moving, very affecting, even as I see it for the thousandth time. The sense of defeat it conveys; despite her best efforts in standing up for herself she can only sit there drained and defeated.

Many people say it’s typical of a male filmmaker that he would stay with the man and not follow Cora. But whereas there may be something in that, the real issue, I thought at that stage, was to stay put and not go chasing Cora off to her mother-in-law’s with the camera. We were their neighbours, after all—we lived almost next door. Well, I lived next door and Rowena came every day.

D: It also has to do with the way in which Celso claims you as a friend, a confidant. Your relationship with him is very close. It’s as much from his side as your side, it seems, especially at this point in the film. He really needs you, I feel. To leave him would have been strange.

G: That’s right.

D: One question I’d like to ask you is about the ending as a whole, because in a sense you have two very nice endings. The Manila Bay ending is one, and then you have the scene where Celso and Cora are back together, which resolves the split between them, even if only temporarily. I suppose one could even see that
as a coda to the real ending. I don’t know how you thought about that. Did you have questions in your own mind about where the film should end, or was it always meant to be that way?

G: It could have been a possible ending, and quite a cute one—the frame abandoned by Celso leaving, to leave us to stare blankly at the busy traffic and highrise apartments fronting Manila Bay. I think I was thinking that way as I shot it. But I don’t think I would ever have willingly ended the film with Cora as just an absence. And it’s not like they didn’t actually reconcile after that. And maybe it’s also preferable, in a dramaturgical sense, that the film finally suggests, if anything, that difficult times can, and do, get muddled through. On the other hand, I was far from wanting to promote the idea that reconciliation—and the comfort of a happy ending—is always the answer.

D: The other thing I would say is that all endings are unsatisfactory, because life doesn’t end and there is always a certain sense of artificiality. I think it was E. M. Forster who wrote about this in relation to the novel. He says novels start out wonderfully and develop wonderfully and toward the end they almost always become unsatisfactory because you see the mechanism grinding to the end.

G: Exactly. That is what I was worried about with the ending. You know the scene near the end where Maricel insists on leaning down—Celso is holding her at the time—to kiss Rowena and then the camera...

D: That goodbye moment.

G: Yes, it was very nice that that happened, if only to bring back Rowena—and myself, in a way—back into the picture in the final stage.

D: I think there is a powerful sense of coming back into the light at the end of the film, which has a lot of resonance with other works in which people descend into darkness—you know, Orpheus in Hades. So the shape of the film gains a lot from that ending and the feelings we attach to darkness and light, or being enclosed and being open. It comes very naturally out of the events, but at the same time it gives the film a quality that it wouldn’t otherwise have. It’s the hope it expresses that Maricel, particularly, can grow healthy and strong—that there’s something she can get from the sun and the air.

G: What Celso says, right at the end, ‘It’s just not equal’ is the key. It’s a simple thing but it’s the key to everything that is wrong. Just before that, trying to analyse why he’s been pushed off his prime selling spot by the hotel management, he makes it clear when he says, ‘I just don’t know why they bother with such small things when they themselves are so rich’. I think ultimately

10 Forster, E. M. 1927, Aspects of the Novel, Harcourt, Orlando, Fl.
what persuaded me to go with a rhetorical ending was because it came very much out of Celso’s own unprompted analysis. It’s a very apt analysis, in the simplicity of his words—‘It’s just not equal’—in a world that holds to equality.
Discussion between David MacDougall and Gary Kildea about *Doon School Chronicles*

Canberra, August–October 2002

[Note: This discussion is edited from a longer conversation. Asterisks indicate where sections of the conversation have been omitted.]

G: Maybe you can talk a little bit about how you came to put *Doon School Chronicles* together like this…

D: The film changed quite radically during the process of making it, because initially I was attempting to look at the school as a kind of crossroads of people from different backgrounds. I had an idea of the school as a very heterogeneous place where there was a lot of mixing, and perhaps a lot of conflict. This was based on my preconceptions, and the fact that I was looking for some sort of cross-cultural engagement. But as I lived at the school for a while I began to feel that in fact it was a very homogeneous culture, a specially constructed kind of society with its own distinct boundaries.

There is an increasingly narrow focus as you move through the five Doon School films, from this film, *Doon School Chronicles,*¹ which is about the whole school, to the next film, *With Morning Hearts,*² which is about one group of first-year students. When you reach the fifth and final film, *The Age of Reason,*³ it’s a portrait of one student. So I had an intention to move closer and closer. This first film therefore had to make the broadest kind of analysis of the school in terms of its ideology and history, but without losing sight of the experiences of people within it.

G: I think it’s a very important part of your work, especially in this film, that you’re very careful to quarantine your writing insights from your cinematic insights.

D: I wanted to establish some quite strict rules for looking at the film, communicated through the film’s own structure. But I also wanted there to be other elements in the film that existed independently of the ideas that lay behind the structure, particularly in the way that the audience might engage

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with the place and the people. Even if they came away from the film with no specific conclusions, or only unconscious ones, they would still have had the satisfying experience of encountering people and places in a particular way.

In this I had a sense that rhythm and timing were important—the kind of timing that is created by a progression of shots. And little things, like the way in which a sound at the end of a scene will give you the point at which to cut to the next shot, because it’s like a rhythmic foreshadowing of the cut. I’ve been conscious of that sort of quasi-musical structuring all the time in the editing.

G: The finished product of *Doon School Chronicles* looks so inevitable: it’s so solid, so sure of itself in content and form…

D: I had no preconceptions about what sort of film it had to be. There was nobody looking over my shoulder saying you must bring us a ninety-minute documentary feature, or it must have a certain narrative structure, or a certain style to it. That was reassuring, because I was able to treat it more experimentally.

*View Opening Sequence of Doon School Chronicles*  

G: So we’ve just looked at the first six shots: the bicycle passing with some of the laundry on the ground; the woman shaking out the shirt; the women spreading the shorts on the ground; the shirts on the ground and the shorts hanging on the clothesline—six shots and the film’s up and running. What can you say about it?

D: Why does the film begin this way? I suppose that is the main question. One part of the answer is that I wanted you to know you were in India. This is a problem posed at the beginning of any film. Where are we? Especially so if the title of the film doesn’t give anything away. The title isn’t *Salaam India*, for example. By showing these women, I felt the scene would tell you very quickly, very efficiently: ‘This is India.’ And then, of course, it would raise the question, ‘What’s going on here?’ What is all this clothing that we see spread out? The scene moves from a general shot to closer shots of what are obviously uniforms. They are all blue, or blue and grey. We also move from the first shot, which is a wide shot of all the clothing—rather striking in itself, because there’s so much of it—to the very abrupt sound of shaking out the clothing. This is a rhythmic element. It takes you by the scruff of the neck and says, ‘Here we are. This is the sound of cloth.’

There’s perhaps something very attractive in a simplification of life that involves everybody wearing the same clothes, but at the same time when you see clothing...
hung up like that it’s suggesting that the people are possibly interchangeable. This clothing would certainly be interchangeable if it didn’t have the numbers sewn in for each boy. But the worry is that the people become interchangeable. So at the back of the film are my ambiguous feelings about this entire subject. And, of course, it’s a central theme of the film: the contrast between order and individuality. It is built both emotionally and intellectually into the film.

G: We want to establish it’s India, but you might also say, why didn’t we start with a wide shot of the school, which we do have later, and that would establish that it’s a school. What’s withheld is as important...

D: Yes, exactly. It’s trying not to tell you too much. If, for example, it were a shot that said ‘School’—with buildings and students walking past them. The intention here was to withhold information about where we are, just giving you enough to make you wonder: ‘What’s going on here? Where are we? Why all this clothing?’

G: It says: bring your poetic sensibility to this. Be prepared to, not think, but feel—think; think and feel interpenetrated.

D: There’s one other aspect to it too. I think the filmmaker has to impose his or her will on the audience from quite early in the film. You have to be saying: ‘Well, either you’re going to come with me on this journey or you’re not.’

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D: Under the image of a stack of shirts is a kind of bridge of sound. The sound of outdoor activity—of voices—comes up under it. And there’s a still image. A number of the images here are stills. And for the first time you actually see a student.

G: And that’s a purely formal image, more like a Mondrian painting.

D: Yes, and the way in which these blocks of colour appear on a school uniform are obviously part of the aesthetics of the school.

G: Yes, but also the aesthetics of David MacDougall.

D: Well, yes, it’s a reinterpretation—and a heightening of the aesthetics. That’s a question that comes up in relation to the film sometimes. People ask, ‘To what extent are you revealing the school’s own aesthetic system, and to what extent are you simply imposing your own aesthetic sense upon it—even aestheticising the school?’ My response to that is that it’s an interpretation of the school’s aesthetics, through heightening, through exaggeration, through selection on my part. It’s what I see and what I am trying to analyse. So that’s the intellectual side of the equation.
G: If you were just hand-holding, or even on a tripod, and even if the boy was perfectly still—the tiny, tiny pieces (even that goes for the shot with the clothing also in the linen room)—how would it be different if it was a tripod shot, say, of that clothing when nothing is moving, the camera’s not moving, the clothes are not moving?

D: I don’t know if it works this way for other people, but for me the very deadness of the still image acts as a kind of punctuation, and an invitation to move into the next part of the film. Which it does, because we go from the shot of the boy’s back to the title card, which is about the backs and fronts of people—and the ‘pack of cards’ image, which I thought was a marvellous simile that the headmaster used. He was very fond of this sort of language, and it seemed very pertinent at this point in the film. The quotation—part of which is ‘Now you can think of yourselves as a pack of cards, all with the same pattern of blue and grey on your backs’—ends up being about ‘each boy’s special character’. The shot that follows of the boys’ faces during the call-over has a kind of ‘Aha!’ quality, because you say, ‘Yes!’ You should respond in that way, I think, as a viewer—in that ‘Aha!’ way. And then of course each boy is different. They have such different faces, represent such different cultures—there’s a boy there from Sikkim—and they’re all different sizes, even though they’re the same age. So that becomes the bridge into the main title of the film.

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D: The next section is the scene of measuring heights and weights that follows the main title. I see the idea of measurement as an important theme to announce just at this point—at the ‘second beginning’ of the film, so to speak. And of course it echoes the idea of uniforms—everything about that aspect of the school. And yet it’s very lively and shows how these boys are boys like any others.

G: ‘What is the measure of a man?’ is the obvious thing that is suggested. Literally, what is the measure of an individual? And just as in the call-over, how does a system deal with a bunch of individuals? One is by naming them, giving them names, and calling them names, and making them own to the name. Another one is precisely to measure them.

D: Here I am also introducing the theme of adolescence and growth. The boys are being measured because they’re growing up. You see them at different stages. The last boy is very small; the others are already practically men. And so, in a sense, we see that the film is also going to be addressing this period in people’s lives when they are growing up, the transition from childhood to adulthood.
Certainly filming measurement was something I wanted to do, but this scene so dominates everything with its own life, you know, that it overcomes anything that might be pinned on it as ‘meaning’. Because these individuals on the screen are so oblivious of those meanings; it’s partly that, isn’t it?

G: In general terms, what a film like this is doing is harnessing the incredible power of the multiplicity of meanings that a film shot contains.

D: Then it shifts to introduce these boys in their room, and a very natural everyday scene of them eating biscuits.

G: So we’ve moved from the ultimate formality of the opening—the clothes on the ground, and also the human formality of the gentleman explaining to you exactly what each piece of clothing is, in a formal manner—through to the formality of the boys, where we get the idea planted, we’re able to work on those ideas of the individual and names and measures and everything. And it suddenly says ‘informality’ and ‘individual’. So it shows that we’re moving somewhere.

D: The contrast is very important. In fact many films, but maybe especially this kind of film, work by constantly jumping ahead, forming juxtapositions between two scenes, so they reflect on each other in some way. You’re propelled forward into a new place. And yet this transition also has a very nuts-and-bolts purpose, which is to introduce you to the characters, in the way that thousands of films do.

G: The first sound of the measuring, the man [measuring], and shunk! Then that measuring bar comes down on the guy’s head with a sort of percussive sound. It’s throughout the film, isn’t it?

D: You can think of sounds as operating in all sorts of different ways. Sometimes they are integral to the shot; sometimes they are like punctuation, propelling you forward into the next scene or announcing something new in the scene. So in the editing one is very conscious of that kind of rhythmic progression, because it’s often very necessary to carry the weight of materials that are not closely associated with each other and visually are quite complex. Yes, it’s a way of carrying the audience forward.

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D: I suppose what’s most important for me in the scene of the classroom is the interaction that’s going on among the students, and then between them and the teacher, and the boredom of classrooms that most of us remember, and the response to this boredom that they have. And of course, another thing that’s very important in this scene is developing Rohan as a character—the small boy with glasses.
G: In a way, it is the first scene where we’re in classic observational cinema mode.

D: Although it is highly edited.

G: Oh yes, but that’s not a contradiction.

D: But it’s highly constructed, boiled down from a much longer observational scene.

G: Yes, but what I mean is [it’s] the first time. Here the engagement for the first time is the pleasure of voyeuristically looking in on [the interaction in the classroom].

D: We now come to the segment with Rohan talking to the camera, followed by the shots leading into the assembly. Well, here it’s of course going into a kind of interview mode, although I tried to keep it from being journalistic in style. And that was one reason for leaving the long opening where he says nothing and is simply thinking. Then the question comes. This is actually part of an hour-long interview with him. A lot of his importance in the film is, in a sense, retrospective. It’s created after the fact in editing, although I also filmed quite a lot about him in other situations. But the things he had to say were so interesting that he more or less worked his way into the film. The shots that follow quite intentionally pick up his idea of the artificiality of the school. He says, ‘It was made artificial deliberately, I suppose.’ And then you see the sculptures: artificial boys. And then a shot of the same sculptures but with live boys behind them. Then a fairly close shot of just legs and shorts as they’re waiting, which is a reflection back on earlier scenes in the film.

G: This time it’s the ‘direct camera’. And I think it can’t be called an interview. I think it can only be called a talk to camera, because an interview has its own fixed agenda, which it’s trying to draw out. You get the feeling that it’s really a discussion that has come to this. Remember the ideology of a certain form of cinéma-vérité where ‘interviews’, as they were called, were sort of forbidden and disallowed?

D: I can’t think of many filmmakers who haven’t used interviews of some kind at some point. There is such a range of possibility, all the way from the very formal interview to the kind of informal interaction you have with Celso in Celso and Cora, which is at the other end of the spectrum.5

G: In any kind of cinema, which is basically observational/participational, it would be very odd not to have discussions to camera. It would be very artificial—or not so much artificial, but if you stuck to observation only, you’re more or less

5 See the previous essay in this volume for Gary and David’s detailed discussion of Celso and Cora.
stuck with not acknowledging the camera’s presence at all…Suddenly you get to observe in a different way. But it’s very important that we know Rohan a bit already, before we get to talk to him.

D: Yes, that was important to establish beforehand. I thought it was crucial to bring him into the film before this scene. I know I selected him because of qualities that I admired in him. His articulateness, his ideas were important, not just because they advance the film but because they somehow establish him as a presence that makes the film worthwhile. The film is bearing witness to the existence of people like him.

G: So this little section takes us from the idea, which is Rohan speaking about the artificiality of the school, and the statues, the idea of artificiality. There’s a little linkage, like so much of the film. In fact, it seems to me that almost every scene progresses to the next by some kind of linkage, whether it be of sound or idea or image.

D: This kind of linking is really a way of keeping the film together when the ingredients are otherwise so varied.

G: Yes, but it creates such a coherence that the film has the elegance and assurance of a good piece of writing, say—a piece of your own writing, for example.

D: I wouldn’t draw a direct link between writing and film editing. But I know that in editing I’m often looking for these links. And since the film is not linked by chronology, it’s a different way of organising things and directing attention to the way the ideas fit together, rather than events taking place chronologically, one after another. So I suppose if a film is in an essay form, rather than a strictly narrative form, there’s some connection with writing.

If it has a sense of inevitability about it, of a written progression, that’s of course only achieved through a lot of searching in the editing, a lot of trial and error in organising the material. This allows it to flow, both in terms of ideas and emotional content, and then of course in its pace, its rhythmic aspects, the alternation of different kinds of material that are nevertheless linked in some way. I think the reason this sort of film takes so much time to edit is because you don’t have a clear and obvious framework, only a thematic and intellectual one. You don’t have the framework of a central chronology.

When I’m filming I find that I’m constantly adding to a list of possible scenes that I might shoot. It’s a rolling list. I’m adding new ideas every day to the bottom of the list—things I’ve seen or things I think might happen—and then as I go along I’m of course shooting some of those scenes and I’m able to cross them off the list. Or I may realise that something isn’t really relevant to what I’m
interested in, so I cross it off for that reason. It’s a way of keeping ahead of me a set of possibilities that I can keep exploring, and thinking constantly about what the film needs.

G: Whereas another kind of filmmaking process might simply say, ‘Oh, all we need is a line of commentary to make this clear’.

D: Yes. I’m always looking for the scene that will clarify something else I’ve shot, rather than an external structure that will explain it. But I suppose this comes out of an approach that’s closer to the way that fiction films are constructed, because they explain themselves through a progression of scenes, not through an external commentary.

G: It’s to some extent directed, because I think it’s a combination of pushing a little bit and accepting to be pushed.

D: That’s right. You have to be open to the unexpected. Because the situation itself is constantly teaching you new things, and if you went into the film with a script, knowing what you were going to say, then the filming process wouldn’t be one of exploration. It would simply be a process of illustrating what you already knew at the start. And that’s a totally different way of making films.

Of course, how you do it is not thought out at every moment. It’s something that results from how you’re resonating with that moment—where you place your body, where you aim the camera, how you frame things. All this is something that you learn through experience to do without thinking, and it’s a very pleasurable process if things are going well.

The voice of the film changes register whenever it goes into the inter-titles. And yet because the inter-titles are all quotations, the register is not altogether different, because it is in a sense just another observation, in this case of writing. These quotations are fragments of writing that pertain to the school—that have been picked up, gathered, collected.

View Dormitory Sequence of *Doon School Chronicles*[^6]

D: Then we go to [the] waking-up scene. Sound is very important throughout this section. It’s about the sounds of early morning—and, later on, the sounds when they’re doing their physical training. In the bathroom, too, sounds are very important. I think the whole mood of this is about early morning, and in a way all the things you hate to do in school: to get up in the morning, to wash,
the horrible exercises which, although everybody grumbles about them when they are in the school, they say years later they valued. Even the things they hated the most!

G: Everyone is in their own bed trying to face the idea of transiting from sleep mode to wake-up mode, which is always problematic.

D: It is a big shift from a public space to this personal space, which is very domestic, too—because we’re now in a dormitory room. We can see also the very simple beds that they have, and the lack of possessions, and the rigour of this place. Although the school is a school of privilege, the living conditions are very simple, and that is all a part of the school’s ideology.

G: And this is the first time we’ve felt a twinge of almost voyeuristic guilt that observational films often carry along with them. I think it’s a very positive aspect of the film, because it gets us into another space. Do you feel that this is a sort of change of gear in the film?

D: Yes. It’s true that it is an invasion of their sleep; for me, sleep is a sort of sacred condition. I am very hesitant ever to wake anybody up, because I almost feel that one doesn’t have the right to. Here, clearly, I am there before they wake up, and one wonders, perhaps, ‘How did he get there? Is he doing this without their permission? What right does he have to be there?’ And so on. And then, of course, you recognise Rohan, I hope, whom we’ve met before, who’s waking up, and who pulls the covers over his head. Audiences find that amusing because it’s so expressive of not wanting to get up.

We’ve been in the room before, because we were there when they were having biscuits together, but that was a more cursory scene. This is now a bit deeper. Of course the truth of the matter is that I told them, ‘Some morning you’re going to find me here before you wake up’. They quite enjoyed the fact that they were going to be in the film—that I had selected their room and them—but when it came right down to waking up and finding a camera there, there’s a bit of ambivalence in Rohan’s expression.

G: It does sweep us up in precisely these observations of the rhythm of the morning and the attention to detail. We are out into the field suddenly with the exercises. We have the pleasure of a narrative of what happened next, and we have the pleasure of the rhythm, recognising the rhythm of life...The film is sort of tumbling along, despite it not having any real, sort of big narrative. It’s tumbling along by this idea of contrast and development, and changing gear, changing register. And then when we get into Rohan’s little character portraits, we have suddenly gone into a new register altogether, where we are now engaged at another level of audience interest. And that is the different characters, as seen through one of the characters.
D: Then the film moves into the bathroom, which is more intimate still, because they’re doing such things as combing their hair, going to the urinal, washing. And I think this maybe prepares you for the character sketches of them that come later, this inside view of Rohan and his friends.

G: Here are ideas about individuals—again coming back to the pack of cards. So not in an externally applied way, but in a very seemingly natural, integrated way. In Rohan telling about other characters, he is also telling us about his own character.

D: In this later scene in which Rohan describes his friends, I wanted the images to reflect the character of each boy. I think it’s important that Rishabh is described as being both a bit clumsy and very intelligent, because one quality offsets the other. We have a sense that he isn’t just clumsy, he isn’t just naughty; he has another side—that he’s very good at maths and physics and so on. And Rohan is willing to attribute this to him, to give him credit for it.

G: Yes, and the sophistication of his assessments is wonderful, and that’s the true usefulness, the deepest meaning of the scene, I think. Simply the perspicacity of that boy, and that reminds us, as the rest of the film does, that young people are a lot smarter, a lot more complex and sophisticated than the adult world gives them credit for.

D: Yes, that’s one of the objects of this whole project: to look at the rationality of childhood. Not just to look at childhood through the stereotypes of sentiment or immaturity or inadequacy, but to show that theirs is a coherent world.

G: Here are ideas about individuals—again coming back to the pack of cards. So not in an externally applied way, but in a very seemingly natural, integrated way. In Rohan telling about other characters, he is also telling us about his own character.

D: So now we’re beginning a new chapter, a new part of the film: Chapter Six. And it’s headed by a quintessential imperial statement about sport and character by A. E. Foot, the first headmaster, in 1938. ‘By the age of fourteen, a Doon School boy should know the right way to hit, throw or kick any sort of ball at cricket, hockey, football or tennis. He should be able to bear the pain which is liable to be involved in most games without flinching.’

I suppose it’s also convenient that they’re playing cricket here, which is the quintessential imperial game. This section is now going to introduce us to a new character. In a way he is only the second character to be introduced, if we take Rohan’s group of four in the dormitory as almost a single entity. This is Arjun Sood, a younger boy. He’s in his second year, but he’s clearly younger than
the others that we’ve been focusing on. What sort of character he is, and what sort of role he’ll take in the film, still remains to be seen. But he’s going to be a different sort of character.

Arjun gets in trouble finding the score cards and—I thought rather surprisingly and quite winningly—he asks for help, which is something I don’t think would happen in our culture. He just quite easily says: I’m in trouble; help me. And the other boy runs to his assistance and helps him and they get it right.

G: It’s the sort of ironic sense of the whole film’s perspective that the real, the far more interesting drama is happening keeping the score, keeping the scoreboard going than actually making the runs…

D: Yes, we only see a very brief shot of the cricket match. It’s all going on at the periphery. As a footnote to this, I should tell you that I shot this scene with a little one-chip camera, a Sony PC 7, that I’d taken with me on my first visit to the school, when I stayed there only about two weeks. I was using it as a kind of note-taking device. I was just learning to use it and feeling my way into events that were going on around the school. And I was meeting people. One of the people I met was Arjun. So this scene turned out to be useful later on when he became more prominent as a character in the film.

G: The boxing scene is contrastive and full of action. What can you say about the whole boxing scene?

D: It’s mindful of movies and boxing on television. It’s constructed around those tropes about boxing. It’s also very condensed and impressionistic, in the sense that the three rounds are shortened—particularly the second round in which only three punches are thrown, I think. All the focus is on the sidelines. And the scene fits within the context of A. E. Foot’s nostrum about bearing the pain of games without flinching. It’s a scene about the production of masculinity and manhood in a school like this, within the cultural context that created it historically.

I needed to let the scene settle down before going on to the scene of Arjun’s retrospective view of it, which in fact wasn’t the next day but some months later. You can tell that he’s a bit older looking, he’s grown a bit. Another theme of this part of the film, of course, is growth: physical growth and the transformation from being a child to being a man. And that sort of biological growth underpins the cultural expectations about childhood and manhood that I mentioned before: the construction or making of men, which is one reason for the later montage of images of Arjun at progressively older ages. It’s an attempt to nail down that theme.
That shifts into a discussion of his weight and his height, and he makes the very open remark, ‘Yes, this is the time that you grow, twelve or thirteen’. I like it when he says he’s thirteen, and then adds, ‘and a half’. Because at this age a half-year is like a decade; it’s a huge transformation. Then we go to the montage of images of him. The first one is from the early scene when he was keeping the scoreboard for the cricket match. Those that follow were shot at roughly six-month intervals, as he grew older.

G: So for you, those stills are really saying this is growth; it’s continuing the theme of that conversation precisely about growth and change.

D: Many documentary filmmakers have recourse to interviews because they do give you access to aspects of life that might be more difficult to film as actually lived. But in this project I tried to impose on myself the discipline of using interview material only to a limited extent, and to make the film speak in other ways, even though the interview material is quite important.

G: I think it’s appropriate if the film includes some conversation to camera because, again, it’s more or less analogous to how we go about in the world and how we get to know people, and a place, and situations—a bit by conversation, but, more perhaps than anything else, by observation. So this reflects the kind of mix that we have when we go about in the world, about how we become familiar with something—a situation or people.

D: There are some stills here. They are very composed, almost reminiscent of a certain style of photography before the Second World War—spoons in close-up, for example. I still find things are very beautiful when looked at in that way.

G: And it is like taking us by the scruff of the eyeballs, as it were, and forcing us to break out of the temporal sometimes—to segue, again, into that photographer’s sensibility—alertness to the joy to be had in the sheer look of things, and then the sound of things, and the rhythm of things. It’s a well-placed sequence, in keeping with the others, which of course couldn’t have worked at all if it was the only one in the film. To me, it’s just a reprise of that part of the film’s concern with the physical world.

G: The scene with Rohan is quite restful in its own way—extremely laidback conversation where he’s very much at ease, and he’s very much at ease in taking his time to formulate an answer. That characterises his little answer to your question about what’s the nature of intelligence.

D: I gave him as much time as possible at the head of the shot before I asked the question, just to let things settle and establish a feeling of quietness. And the question about intelligence is of course a tough question to ask anybody. But I put it experimentally, to see how he would respond, and I was amazed by the
intelligence of his answer—his very calm and articulate way of saying, ‘I think intelligence is a degree of perfection with which you reply, with which you react to situations’. In a way, he leads us into the next section, since the shot ends with him asserting that intelligence is how you react to situations. Then we enter just such a scene, which is cued by that.

One point about this conversation with Rohan is that I didn’t have a precise list of questions, although I obviously had certain things I wanted to ask him about. But the idea of asking him about intelligence at that moment just came to me. I felt he was ready for it at that psychological moment. He would be able to deal with that kind of question. And it was a mark of my esteem for him that I could put such a very adult question to him, because I felt he would say something that wouldn’t simply be an automatic response.

G: Yes, and a very important part of the scene is that he reflects that, and you can see that he appreciates being treated as a sort of equal.

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G: What’s striking about this scene [with Veer], or this departure for the film at this point, is that it seems to go against common accepted wisdom—ninety minutes in, almost—to introduce a new character. How do you feel structurally about that?

D: It’s true that Veer enters very far along in the film, but it reflects my view, I suppose, that a film can be novelistic rather than modelled on the theatre or the short story. It can have the kind of evolution in which an important new character enters quite late. And it actually picks up the film. It projects it forward into a new zone. In a film this long, that’s maybe even necessary. It’s not only the introduction of a new character; the film enters a new style of filmmaking in several ways. The first way is in the very intimate direct-to-camera moment when he’s asking about the technicalities of the camera. But the scene as it progresses is also quite different from any of the previous sections. It becomes a little story, a film within a film, a play within the play.

G: You say it’s more novel-like, but probably there are only a few novels which also would start introducing a character three-quarters of the way through.

D: I felt that by dividing the film up into ten chapters I had a certain freedom to make each of them different in a way—you know, to make each of them distinctive. I wasn’t bound to preserve the same style throughout; in fact, the very opposite. Each chapter deserved a different treatment, a different approach. So the ten chapters taken together would form a multi-perspectival and multi-vocal study of the school.
D: The story that now unfolds is about the making of a film by Veer. It’s also an exploration of his character. The way he took charge in this scene surprised me. He had an almost authoritarian approach in that meeting. He controlled the discussion.

G: Yes, this becomes very much a cinéma-vérité kind of portrait of personality and power and those kinds of things. It’s slightly less formalistic than earlier parts of the film. Perhaps because we’re with the older boys, we’re suddenly alert to the social interaction. It’s not novel in the film, but there does seem to be a slight movement towards it, a slight shift, do you think?

D: Yes, it’s more of a ‘direct cinema’, or cinéma-vérité scene. It’s a condensation of the meeting, but I think it’s very observational in the sense that you mean. Also, depending on your point of view, it’s cut rather crudely or abstractly. I’m not trying to preserve a sense of continuity so much as trying to go to the heart of the meeting. And I really had no choice but to cut it abruptly, and even make something of a feature of that in the editing. It cuts to Veer a number of times out of continuity, so that it’s clear that it’s a time-cut in each case.

Later we go to the close-ups of shoes and boys trying to clean them off with bits of paper and leaves. It’s amusing and it picks up on some of the earlier shots in the film about shoes and feet, which seem to be important in the school and which express, at least to me, something about the character of the boys. And if you can hear it, they’re talking about a prefect who catches everybody, even if there’s only a little dust on their shoes. It finishes with the joke of one boy polishing his shoe on another boy’s stocking.

G: Yes, that’s a perfect little [instance], the fruit of observation. It’s comic and revealing.

D: Audiences always respond to that moment because it’s so quirky. But I think it shows the kind of cooperation that the boys have against authority. There’s a feeling that they accept this because they’ve all got to avoid being punished for having dirty shoes. Later, the scene of the ‘change-in-break’ punishment brings together a lot of the same elements: clothing, power, the seniors’ power over younger students. The sequence is actually made up of material shot at two quite different times. One of the older boys, who’s been signing chits, explains the process, because I asked him to. It’s a case of the filmmaker directly asking for an explanation, for information. So he tells how it works. What’s nice about it, from my point of view, is that the process is still going on around him.

G: Yes, it’s fantastic. Deep in the shot, the boy is approaching—the subject of what we’re being told about—that is, the boy under punishment. He approaches from the distance and comes right up, and it’s a perfect mis en scène.
D: Scenes should always have more than one reason for being—and, if possible, two or three. Just as when you write a sentence, it should have more to it than just its denotative meaning.

G: This scene of regimentation is more potent than other scenes of regimentation in the film—the marching. This seemed to be almost more joyous than, say, the other marching, which looked more militaristic.

D: Maybe it’s the feeling of impulsive forces at work underneath.

G: Elemental forces of fire and destruction.

D: At the very end of the scene the boys go wild and go running off—after having performed in even rows. There’s a kind of rush offstage that has a certain wildness about it. Somewhere in the background there may be a connection with the scene earlier in the film when Rohan speaks of a mob being uncontrollable—even if you don’t consciously make that connection.

G: Yes, definitely. And again that comes back to the theme of the whole film and this tension between order and the chaos of the mob—or even the chaos of individual desire against society’s imperatives.

D: I liked coming back to Rohan asleep after the torchlight tattoo, because it seems like another world altogether. It’s very quiet. It gives a sense of the next day: the quietness, the relaxation after a big event, when people are getting back to their ordinary lives.

G: And the final scene—the lights-out scene—works very nicely. Again, it gets us back to the ‘little things’. Filmmaking is about the ‘little things’—about time and space.

D: For me, it has a special feeling, with the mosquito nets. The light is even different. It’s as if they’ve made this their home, and it’s a home they’re going to have to leave sometime.

G: I think your film has the sense that you’re quite willing in your filmmaking to give up a lot of—virtually all—direct explanation. And your representation is by carefully, elegantly placed, ‘found’ pieces, which end up making sense. But it’s that modest epistemology which ends up paying off handsomely, precisely because you’re not fighting against the medium. And I think it’s what your whole career has been seeking to discover: what’s the way to maximise this medium? Didn’t we mention before our old friend Bresson’s aphorism ‘It is in its pure form that art hits hard’? I think this film hits hard in that way.
D: Well, that’s probably a good note to end on. One could do worse than end with Bresson.\(^8\)

G: Couldn’t do better.

D: Couldn’t do better either.

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A Multi-Species Etho-Ethnographic Approach to Filmmaking

Natasha Fijn

Through the filming of herders and herd animals within a multi-species hybrid community—essentially two herding encampments in Mongolia—I provide an example of an alternative methodological approach to both ethnographic filmmaking and multi-species research. This paper is a call for scholars engaging in the exciting and emerging area of multi-species ethnography to adopt a multisensory, etho-ethnographic approach to filmmaking in the field with attention to both visual and auditory communication between human and non-human agents.

The paper includes links to video segments from footage filmed in the Khangai mountains of Mongolia. Through a description of the stylistic and logistic techniques employed while filming these key video segments, this paper demonstrates an original approach to the study of humans and other animals in the production of video-based, multi-species etho-ethnography, accompanied by a description of how filmmaking can be used in conjunction with participant observation as a means of engaging in this kind of cross-disciplinary research in the field. My approach includes an orientation towards phenomenology and an attention to bodily and sensory ways of being in the world.1

The first part of the paper foregrounds how my work resonates within the emerging field of multi-species ethnography and how my filmmaking and research have been influenced by David MacDougall’s theoretical and practical approaches to filmmaking, with particular reference to his Doon School Series of films. The second part of the paper provides an explanation of my own filmmaking approach through links to three separate online video segments: ‘Saikhanaa and the Calves’, ‘Lhagva the Herder’ and ‘Training for Naadam’.2

2 Media files can be viewed by going to the ‘Perspectives on Ethnographic Film’ page on the ANU E Press website at http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012
Background

When starting my anthropologically based PhD research—an investigation into domestication as an ongoing process between herders and herd animals in Mongolia—my initial intention was to use video as a methodological tool during my fieldwork, much as a zoologist uses video: to collect data on social interactions and behaviour with the aim of being as objective as possible. My approach has changed considerably, however, through the influence of David and Judith MacDougall’s filmmaking philosophy and practice.

In previous field-based ethological research, I had become disillusioned with the disciplinary restrictions on the level of engagement with my research subjects. The aim of that research was to investigate how kea (*Nestor notabilis*), a mountain parrot, learned in social situations and to test their problem-solving capabilities. I was to observe the behaviour of the animal in question but was to avoid direct contact with individuals during field experiments. Over time the population became habituated to my presence and my whistles but there was an expectation not to engage with the kea on a personal level. Contrary to
this species-level, or population-scale, approach, kea are particularly curious individuals and would often initiate communication and interaction with me as an individual of their own volition, investigating my shoelaces or flying onto my head and shoulders. Through this ethological fieldwork, I had learnt skills in long-term observation but had not had the opportunity to participate cross-specifically, across species boundaries, as anthropologists do cross-culturally.

The use of a video camera for obtaining ethological data is normally restricted to having the camera fixed on a tripod, while the person running the camera remains silent and as immobile as possible throughout. The camera may even be left in a fixed position with the researcher viewing the footage remotely in order to ensure that the animal is likely to behave as it would ‘in the wild’ without any human presence. Such circumstances are not entirely realistic, however, as kea, for instance, often engage with humans in their quest for food or are intent on investigating any object that is colourful and new in their immediate environment, such as windscreen wipers, bicycle seats, rubbish bins, a vacant mountain hut or a sleeping person’s nose. They do not live in an enclosed ‘wilderness’, isolating themselves from other beings, but inhabit a diverse, multi-species world, which includes contact with humans.

My experience with the use of a camera on a tripod to obtain scientific data brings to mind a discussion between Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead where they argue with one another from quite different perspectives on the use of a camera within anthropological research. Mead argues for the recording of ethnography without any intervention from the filmmaker, where she envisages the way of the future would be a 360-degree camera. Bateson argues that he is ‘talking about having control of a camera. You’re talking about putting a dead camera on top of a bloody tripod. It sees nothing.’ I was determined in my next project—encompassing a multi-species research approach—to use the camera without a tripod, for similar reasons to Bateson.

A hand-held camera, in my experience, enables the researcher to make more informed decisions about what is relevant to capture and what one is capable of capturing in any given situation. Instead of striving for an unattainable objectivity, I was aware that my use of a video camera would inevitably result in my own subjective observations. Vertov neatly sums up the subjective process

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3 Beyond the experimental research parameters of the project, I did of course engage with the kea in a different manner when they came to my window or landed on the roof of the mountain hut I was living in. I found these instances some of the most rewarding, in terms of gaining cross-species understanding.

within filmic-based research by the comment: ‘I edit when I choose my subject (from among thousands of possible subjects), and I edit when I observe (film) my subjects (to find the best choice among a thousand possible observations).’

**Multi-Species Etho-Ethnography**

There has been an emerging interest in multi-species, or interspecies, ethnography—work that is inclusive of non-human beings within anthropology. ‘Multi-species’ is a term derived from zoology and ecology but has been adopted by anthropologists to describe a focus that is not only on the human but also on our relationship and connections with non-human others. Previously non-humans in anthropology appeared as symbols, metaphors or tools for human social engagement but animals and plants are now becoming agents in their own right. Anna Tsing writes with regard to this new genre:

> It allows something new: passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied. Once such immersion was allowed only to natural scientists, and mainly on the condition that the love didn’t show. The critical intervention of this new science studies is that it allows learnedness in natural science and all the tools of the arts to convey passionate connection.

My approach to filming herders and herd animals within a multi-species hybrid community—essentially two herding encampments in Mongolia—is an example of an ethno-ethological approach espoused by Dominique Lestel and colleagues. Their paper outlines new terms for studying humans and non-human animals, including elements of both ethology and ethnology, with a tradition rooted in phenomenology and biosemiotics. They use the term ethno-ethology:

> [T]his new ethnological approach sets out to integrate the analysis and understanding of our knowledge of the living world, its organization as well as its application, in an approach to the interactive relational system

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7 Donna Haraway is one of the key writers relating to this ‘species turn’ in anthropology; see Haraway, D. 2008, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; and Haraway, D. 2003, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, people and significant otherness*, The Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago.
that links humans and non-humans. At the same time, it grants all living beings the status of relational beings, that is, agents interacting on the phenomenon of ‘culture’ that was hitherto reserved for human beings.9

There are a number of observational-style ethnographic films about herding culture but most tend to focus on the herders themselves with the animals they herd as peripheral elements in relation to the central subject matter of the film (the human Other). Examples of such films are David MacDougall’s *To Live with Herds* (1973) and his later *Tempus de Baristas* (1993).10 One recent observational film that engages in a multi-species landscape is *Sweetgrass*.11 This film was ‘recorded’ by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and here the emphasis is just as much on the recording of the audio as on the visual imagery.12

Similar to my film *Khangai Herds*, in *Sweetgrass*, instead of a reliance on commentary or interviews, or even the social engagement between people, the focus is on the sounds of the humans and other animals—in this instance, the communication between the cowboys and their horses, dogs and all-important sheep. Through radio microphones on the cowboys, Lucien Castaing-Taylor records the audio of the soft encouragement of one and the frustrated and angry swearing of another herder towards the flock of sheep. The sounds add to an embodied feeling of being somehow a part of the muster with the barking of the dogs, the endless calling of mother sheep to their nearly fully grown lambs and a nervous horse’s hooves as they clatter across a rushing stream, accompanied by the soft sounds of encouragement from its rider. In my view, in a complex multi-species landscape, these embedded sounds are the ones that are important, not detailed conversation or interviews telling the audience what is unfolding. Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor explore the interspecies relationship, giving agency to the sheep both as individuals and as a herd, much as was my intention when filming Mongolian herd animals.

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Observational Filmmaking

Back in 2004, I had recently started a PhD at The Australian National University. I found myself at an intensive eight-hour screening, featuring five films from David MacDougall’s Doon School Series. Just as I would have images of my ski tips when I closed my eyes after a day’s skiing, I had images of the Doon School behind my eyelids that evening. The screening was a deeply immersive experience and completely changed my approach towards the use of video in future research. Through the films I felt that I had grown to know some of the boys in the films as real people and could gain a quality of understanding from the Doon School films that I could not gain from other documentary genres. It was a good introduction to an observational style of ethnographic filmmaking, a style that I could feasibly undertake and integrate with a written monograph.

David MacDougall’s observational style means that his filmmaking can be both interpretative and revelatory. His films are not explanatory but are about inquiry and investigation, requiring the audience to think harder while watching the film and to pay attention to detail rather than to make broad judgments and conclusions. Here was a more embodied, phenomenological approach to filmmaking, where the focus could be on details of bodily engagement, rather than verbal dialogue, without the need for an overriding didactic form of narration. As Anna Grimshaw points out, in relation to one of the Doon School films, With Morning Hearts, ‘we are left to judge the evidence that is presented to us in the form of movements, gestures, actions, responses to people and situations. Much of it is non-verbal and implicit.’ I could see the potential for this style of filmmaking to be used in the often non-verbal, physical communication between humans and other animals.

This kind of ethnographic filmmaking is not just a means of presenting the results of research already attained, or aspiring towards an objective means of collecting data, but involves the researcher/filmmaker as an active participant and observer. While still in the process of editing the Doon School Series in 2001, David MacDougall writes how the advent of digital video ‘has brought the ethnographic filmmaker’s situation closer to that of the classical anthropological

14 I was also influenced by other ethnographic filmmakers connected with The Australian National University, particularly Gary Kildea, Judith MacDougall, Ian Dunlop and Pip Deveson. For an insight into the range of visual anthropology-related research undertaken by PhD students in 2007, see Bexley, A. and Fijn, N. (eds) 2007, ‘Special Issue: Visual anthropology’, The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology, vol. 8.
fieldworker, engaged in participant observation. It has also brought ethnographic filmmaking closer to the ideal of a more personal camera envisaged by the “direct cinema” filmmakers of the 1960s.”

The films in the Doon School Series were the first where David MacDougall worked with digital video, rather than film. David MacDougall also worked independently throughout the entire project (whereas previously he had worked with Judith MacDougall or other filmmakers and anthropologists). Within my own project, with the aid of a compact video camera and a laptop with professional editing capabilities, I could see that I could independently undertake the entire filmmaking process from conducting preparatory research, filming while researching in the field and editing the footage in post-production, to the final presentation of the material. This meant that I was free to make my own decisions along the way and could respond to the herders and herd animals without the inevitable change in social dynamics that an additional foreigner would bring to both the research and the filming. MacDougall noticed the difference between working individually in comparison with working with another filmmaker or anthropologist: ‘the result was a different kind of rapport...those being filmed are quick to sense that even two people filming them form a closed circle, with its own internal interactions.’

David MacDougall explains his approach to the Doon School project within a chapter entitled ‘Doon School reconsidered’:

I felt that filming should be an inquiry leading to a structure, not a structure demonstrating the ideas I had started with. I wanted to find out what it was possible to learn about a school by filming it. When students asked me what I was doing, I told them I was studying the life of the school, but instead of writing a book about it I was going to try to write it with my camera.

Essentially I had a similar goal to David MacDougall (to use video as a mode of inquiry) but the presentation of the material would be through a text-based monograph, *Living with Herds in Mongolia*, with an integration of the filmic material in some meaningful way. I made a 90-minute observational film,

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20 As early as 1942, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead integrated the use of film and photography with written ethnography; see Bateson, G. and Mead, M. 1942, *Balinese Character: A photographic analysis*, New York Academy of Sciences, New York.
Khangai Herds, focusing on the same themes of cross-species social engagement and coexistence as my etho-ethnography in the text. The two mediums were linked by references to segments of the film in the text.21

This paper (and indeed this entire Humanities Research journal issue) is a further exploration of linking text with filmic-based online segments. Below I will discuss my filmic and etho-ethnographic intentions behind three separate video segments. The three segments are representative of different elements of the herders’ and herd animals’ domestic coexistence.

Three Etho-Ethnographic Examples

![Image](Image)

**Figure 2** Still image from *Khangai Herds* Segment 2: Saikhanaa and the Calves

*View Khangai Herds Segment 2: Saikhanaa and the Calves*22

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21 This research has since been published as a book; see Fijn, N. 2011, *Living with Herds: Human–animal coexistence in Mongolia*, Cambridge University Press, New York. Within the book there are footnote references linking to online video segments, providing key illustrative examples to accompany the text. This paper differs from my thesis and the subsequent book in that it features my filmic intentions through a detailed explanation of the three online video segments.

The video segment ‘Saikhanaa and the Calves’ is about the intertwined lives of Saikhanaa and the cattle he engages with every day of the year. The sequence begins with the main protagonist of the first part of *Khangai Herds*, the young herder Saikhanaa, cantering on horseback away from the camera. The next scene is the arrival of a yak bull to Choijo’s summer encampment, followed by the rest of the herd. The yak (or *sarlag*) arrives before the rest of the herd with purple tongue extended, panting. This is an introduction to the pace of the film and the quietness of the audio with minimal background noise—an unusual lack of traffic noise, machinery or passing aeroplanes. Gradually there is the sound of many hooves approaching and the odd *sarlag* grunt. Here, my intention was for the viewer to engage with the multi-species landscape: Saikhanaa on horseback, the male *sarlag*, followed by the cows and the distinctive accompanying sounds.

In the next scene, Saikanaa’s mother enters the frame leading a calf, a cow recognises that this is her calf and comes over for a sniff, calf and human head in different directions, as the calf starts to follow its mother. The visual image is accompanied by the clanging of old-style milk containers and the whistling and calling of Saikhanaa to the herd outside the frame. These initial shots are framed at a wide angle and at a distance with the intention of conveying the general atmosphere in the morning before milking begins.

We are then amongst the herd as Saikhanaa’s mother hand milks a cow, while another *sarlag* chews her cud waiting to be milked. We move to more activity as the milking starts in earnest, with multiple herders milking and cows vocalising to their calves. Some of the shots are at the height of the cows (and the women milking), to give an indication of what it is like to be amongst a herd of *sarlag* during milking time. The milking process is very much a part of the everyday routine in the summer within Choijo’s encampment.

Part of my focus on Saikhanaa was to show just how hard he worked while still a boy and how skilled he is at handling the animals. Saikhanaa would prepare the cows for milking by taking the calves to feed from its mother’s udder and by hobbling each cow’s legs in preparation for milking. I would undertake these same tasks when not filming. Saikhanaa would always prepare the cows that Naraa would milk. I give an indication of this through a scene where Naraa asks Saikhanaa to hurry and to take the calf away so that she can get on with milking. Milking is serious business, as it is the main source of food for the extended family.

I film from inside the calf pen as Saikhanaa selects a calf to take to its mother. This was to convey the perspective of the calves as one-by-one they are called
to the gate and led to feed from their mother. I first wanted to indicate to the viewer how the calves knew their own names, then later how Saikhanaa knew the names of each calf and their respective mother.

One of the few scenes where I engage in a more reflexive manner is when I encourage Saikhanaa as he names the calves and their mothers. As Saikhanaa is not outspoken, or particularly talkative, I wanted to encourage him to continue with his kinship connections. When Saikhanaa indicates the names of the calves directly to camera (to the author behind the camera), he does not just point to the calves from a distance. Saikhanaa climbed inside the calf’s pen with the calves and makes contact with them with a hand or foot as he names them. One viewer after a public screening commented that he thought Saikhanaa was being rough with the calves, but this was not my impression in the field, as they are used to this degree of contact with individuals from the family, particularly Saikhanaa. The calves are not fearful of Saikhanaa, as they have grown up from birth being handled by him and they know him just as well as the other cattle in the herd.

A couple of shots show how Saikhanaa handles individual calves, some of whom are quite large in relation to his own body weight. He negotiates this by pushing them along with his whole body. There is constant bodily engagement with the animals, where communication is not just linguistic or verbal but also kinaesthetic.\(^23\) This is contrasted with his whistles to the herd as a whole as they leave the milking area. The milking scenes are not just about engaging with the footage in a visual sense but also about listening to the subtle vocalisations and communication between individual herders and individual cattle.

My knowledge of the daily milking routine, through active participant observation in the milking process, meant that I too knew the individual names of herders, cows and calves. I knew the process intimately, which meant that I could direct my focus on the filming itself, rather than on what may be happening next within the milking routine. Through participating in the milking routine throughout each day, the cattle knew my individual scent and were no longer wary of my presence. I could gauge how close I could film with the camera and felt at ease with my focus being within the viewfinder of the camera, rather than on what was happening on either side or behind me. I would not always have the camera with me but would choose a day when the weather was not too blustery or when I knew that the extended herding family had enough people to carry out the milking without my help while I was occupied with the camera.

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The segment ‘Lhagva the Herder’ introduces Lhagva and her mother, Dogsomjav, as people, as herding women, and gives an indication of how Lhagva engages with cattle. The other key characters within this sequence are Oodon the cow and her newborn calf, Menget.

The viewer is introduced to Lhagva through her singing to me (perhaps with an audience in mind) behind the video camera. Through this song, my intention was to show the connection of Lhagva with her mother. The herders I encountered often sang about their herding life and about herd animals, particularly horses. Lhagva’s song reveals a reverence towards mothers and their nurturing role. Within this song an ‘elegant, dappled-grey horse’ is pivotal in assisting to connect the singer with her mother. In the next shot I briefly introduce Dogsomjav as she sits milking a cow and turns towards the camera.

25 This scene links with another scene within Khangai Herds, where Saikhanaa is also introduced as a character through singing to the camera.
During my fieldwork I did not record many formal, ‘talking-head’ interviews, as my aim was to capture the social engagement and behavioural interaction, through both verbal and bodily communication, rather than requiring the viewer to watch a herder just talk about how they engaged with herd animals. In fact, the herders are not inclined to talk about such things, as they have grown up living with herd animals and would be unlikely to think about how they could potentially relate to animals in any other way.

Included here is one of the few interviews I did film and this was towards the end of my year of living in Mongolia, hence I could film without the need for an interpreter. Lhagva had a good idea about what I was interested in, as I had helped her and her mother with the cattle at milking time for many months. I included this interview as it reveals Lhagva’s focus on the cows and their calves, rather than on other kinds of herd animals. She explains how she names the calves and how the cows know her as a person, rather than as a stranger. Lhagva’s reference to naming the calves and blowing into the ears of newborn calves to assist them links with the birthing scene that follows.

The birth of Menget was the first scene I shot when I was in Dogsomjav’s encampment in early spring. The birthing scene begins with a wide shot of the winter shelters to give an indication that the birth is occurring during a snowstorm and in freezing temperatures. Soon after the calf is born, Lhagva blows in the calf’s ears and clears the amniotic sac from around the calf’s mouth. Lhagva becomes one of the first beings the calf comes into contact with, along with its mother. She talks directly to the calf and checks whether it is a female or male, exclaiming ‘it’s a girl’ and remarks about how long Menget’s hooves are while, unperturbed, Oodon loudly guzzles up the surrounding amniotic fluid. Lhagva provides Oodon with some medicinal herbs in milk to give the old cow strength and to assist with the release of the afterbirth. It is important that the calf stands immediately after birth in order to have the ability to suckle from the cow’s teats. Lhagva moves the calf around to Oodon’s teats to assist the calf to have her first feed.

Lhagva names the calf ‘Menget’, meaning ‘birthmark’, as the calf has an unusual mark on her forehead. This name is significant, as birthmarks are auspicious signs to Mongolian herders. The naming of the calf clearly means that Lhagva identifies this calf as having individual characteristics, and attributes the calf with personality. This was an important element that I wanted to convey about the way that Mongolians in the Khangai herd animals, as they treat the herd animals as extensions of the herding family and essentially as ‘persons’.

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As a postscript to this scene: Menget was Oodon’s eighth and final calf. In the following autumn, Oodon was slaughtered, as she was having trouble eating after losing some of her teeth. Oodon provided the extended family with dried meat over the long, hard winter. This is a good example of the herders’ reciprocal relationship with the herd animals, as Lhagva nurtured Oodon’s calf to help her to survive the harsh conditions, while Oodon provided essential food for the extended family the following winter. When a family herd animal is slaughtered, it is not displayed publicly. Out of respect for the herding family’s beliefs surrounding the slaughter of an animal from the herd, and out of respect for Oodon herself, I refrained from filming the slaughter, even though this would have been valuable for the overall narrative of the sequence and as an indication of the cycle of life in a Mongolian herding encampment.

![Figure 4 Still image from Khangai Herds Segment 9: ‘Training for Naadam’](image)

**View Khangai Herds Segment 9: ‘Training for Naadam’**

*Naadam*, meaning festival in Mongolian, often consists of three sporting events: horseracing, wrestling and archery. My focus, in terms of the *Naadam*, was on the horseracing and how this reflected the importance of the horse in Mongolian herders’ lives.

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In the first shot, boys are preparing the horses for race training by circling around training poles, while singing a specific racing song to the horses. Boys and horses enter and exit the frame as they circle past me. My camera remains in one position, while encompassing the expanding river valley within the frame. Here, my focus was on the young boys riding the horses and the song they sing, to prepare the horses for racing. The trainer, Ochero, stands to one side, also watching, while the boys walk with their horses into the distance. The boys are then seen galloping past on horseback with the sound of the horses’ hooves, the horses’ breathing and the boys’ calls spurring on the horses during a practise race.

Saikhanaa is again a key person in this sequence and he is training a feisty two-year-old (or daaga). The training is in preparation for a series of local Naadam but is also a means of breaking in the energetic daaga. I open the main section by introducing the daaga as a character, showing him still nursing from his mother, then Saikhanaa training the daaga to be tethered by a halter. Saikhanaa rides bareback, circling around a corral to warm up the young horse. The pace is slow and measured, with little background noise. We observe as a young boy runs across the frame, playing with a stick, then back again with Saikhanaa trotting on horseback into the distance. There is a sudden burst of action as human and horse gallop past. The unmistakeable sound of the horse’s hooves as he gallops towards the camera, and Saikhanaa’s calls as he encourages the daaga to go faster, add to the sudden increase in pace. I follow with the camera until Saikhanaa is nearly out of the line of sight, while calls and horse hooves fade into the distance. For me, the gathering cumulus clouds in the distance and the quietness of the scene are very reminiscent of what it felt like in Choijo’s encampment, when there was a lull in herding activity during warm afternoons in the late Mongolian summer.

Once back in the encampment, the daaga is coated in sweat and the trainer, Ankhaa, wipes him down with a scraper. This scene is revealing about interspecies engagement, as the daaga is clearly communicating through kicking and shoving with his head that he is not appreciating being scraped down and is not used to this kind of human contact (as he was only recently ‘broken in’).

A wide shot reveals that the rest of the extended family and visiting relatives are sitting nearby, while Saikhanaa walks the daaga around to cool down. Choijo discusses the upcoming Naadam with the visiting relatives, giving an indication of the organisational structure of a Naadam: horses of different ages race in separate groupings. In this shot I particularly like the interaction in the background, where one of the women, Naraa, is playfully tickling the back of her visiting relative. I continue to record the audio of their discussion in relation to the Naadam while focusing the camera on another trainer, Ganbaa, as he
returns with a sweaty horse, which is then led to cool down. This introduces Ganbaa as a trainer, which continues in the scene that follows, where he is preparing two horses for a *Naadam*.

In preparation for a small local *Naadam* amongst neighbouring herding families, Ganbaa readies the horses for racing by brushing their coats, tying up their tails and holding burning incense beneath their nostrils. Here, the horse opening his mouth to yawn in response to breathing in the incense is a nice moment. Saikhanaa, as jockey, does not participate in this ritual preparation, as this is the role of the trainer. Choijo, as patriarch of the extended family, supervises this preparation and burns juniper incense in a bowl. Here it is quite evident that people have specific roles when it comes to the *Naadam*: Choijo as patriarch of the encampment, Ganbaa as trainer, Saikhanaa as jockey and the two horses as the prized representatives of the horse herd. Young boys are mainly the ones who ride the horses during training and in races. When older, they in turn become race trainers.

The next scene is the location of the *Naadam*, which is held by a number of neighbouring herding encampments within the same broad river valley. The men in the extended family encampment, the young boys and I rode together on horseback more than 10 km to the local *Naadam* (with my video camera bouncing around behind me in my backpack).

I filmed the race flag at the finish line against a blackened sky and by chance there was a flash of lightning in the distance. This is a beautiful scene but it also meant impending rain and I was not keen for my camera to become drenched. Being a spectator of the horseracing means a long wait, then a sudden rush as the horses and jockeys appear and race over the finish line. The spectators merge with the participants within the race as they whoop and gallop their horses, encouraging the racehorses as they cross over the finish line. After the race the jockeys stand alone, not knowing quite what to do with themselves as trainers take over and scrape the sweat from the racehorses as they continue to circle around to cool down. I stood in the middle with Saikhanaa, filming him as a stationary figure in the centre as the horses and trainers move past him. Here it is evident how the horses are the ones that hold the prestige and are fussled over after the race, not the boys who ride them.

As menacing black clouds the colour of steel continued to build in the background, I shoved my camera in my backpack and we rode back towards our herding encampment. In the middle of the river valley humans and horses were suddenly pelted with hailstones, forcing the herdsmen and myself to shelter in a neighbouring *ger* until the weather had passed. Luckily I was able to keep my camera gear dry.
We were all engaging in participant observation, as few (if anyone) were at the local *Naadam* just as spectators—most had ridden on horseback and were part of an extended family whose members were actively competing in the festival, both in the wrestling and in the horseracing. The *Naadam* is not just about competitive sporting prowess but also involves the engagement of local herding families and their relationship with their horses. Here was an example of both filmic observation and active participant observation while in the field: humans and horses engaging in a social event, celebrating the stamina and endurance of one another.

**Conclusion**

The Doon School project was anthropological research interpreted through film. MacDougall states that few documentaries, or even ethnographic films, constitute original research, yet video is ‘uniquely suited to analysing visible cultural forms, the immediacy of individual experience, human relationships with the material world, and social interactions in all their evolving and multivalent complexity’. I would add that it is also uniquely suited to recording human and non-human relationships.

While filming in the field in Mongolia, my principal filming technique was to leave the camera at a wide angle (avoiding the use of distorting telephoto or macro lenses). This resulted in few close-up shots, unless I was physically close to the subject, and meant that one views the human or non-human as a whole, not a series of separate disconnected parts. My approach with the camera was to represent the herders, herd animals and surrounding landscape as they would be viewed by anyone living in the herding encampment.

Everyone in the herding encampment, both humans and other animals, had specific roles. I would participate with hobbling the cows during milking, herding the sheep and goats, or taking the ox and water cart down to the stream to get water. The extended herding family also recognised that part of what I did was film with a video camera, or take still photos and write up my field notes in the yurt (or *ger*) at the end of the day. My aim was to incorporate the use of a video camera as part of what I did on a routine basis while living within the herding encampment. And in this context, it seemed to work, as it was seen as just a part of what I did. Perle Mohl describes the integration of representation and fields of knowledge as *filmic anthropology*, which is ‘characterized by the fact that its potential resides in the field and not beyond it’.

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I employed observational filmmaking both as a mode of inquiry and as a means of interpretation. As an approach to filmmaking in the field, observational filmmaking, with its inherent attention to detail, works well in relation to the engagement between humans and other animals. I paid attention to sensory details, such as: the sounds herders make to the herd animals during milking; the physical engagement between a herder and a newborn calf; or the way a horse responds to a rider when training for a race. Recorded through the medium of video, this kind of multi-species engagement conveys a wealth of sensory information. This information, however, comes across very differently using the medium of textual description (as evidenced by my description of the three examples from my Mongolian fieldwork in this paper, if read without the necessary accompanying video segments).

Research focusing on the agency of both humans and other animals is complex particularly when attempting to find a balanced, non-anthropocentric perspective. It is challenging to describe social engagement, bodily communication and emotional attachment between significant others through text. This is where visual mediums, such as video, can be employed as a means of both interpretation and presentation of research material. Video footage provides an alternative means of engagement with humans and other animals as beings-in-the-world.

A multi-species approach to research requires an observational approach to filmmaking, much as both ethnography and ethology are based on observation. The aim is to allow the subjects (both human and non-human) to engage as they ordinarily would with one another. This does not mean that I, as the filmmaker, am an invisible presence, as I may interact with people and other animals from behind the camera in a reflexive manner. The intended result is to produce documentary that is not set up or manipulated by the researcher but is an observation of events as they unfold. This filmmaking process is not intended to be prescriptive but a compelling method for interpreting etho-ethnographic-based research.

Alongside an emerging interest in multi-species ethnography within anthropology, there has been a renewed interest in observational film within ethnographic filmmaking. Grimshaw and Ravetz refer to the current direction of observational cinema in the following way:

The renewed interest in material, emotional or affective, bodily, and sensory ways of being in the world has been critical to our rethinking observational cinema. It has enabled a shift in the terms of debate, away
from observational filmmaking as a kind of bad science to acknowledge it for what it is—a mode of inquiry that sticks close to lived experience and that seeks to render the finely grained texture of lived experience.\textsuperscript{30}

Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz discuss MacDougall’s Doon School Series and a later film, \textit{Schoolscapes},\textsuperscript{31} as examples of films that are more experimental and engaged with aesthetics. In a footnote to a review, Anna Grimshaw notes that this sensory and phenomenological approach is evident not only in observational cinema but also in emerging interspecies ethnography.\textsuperscript{32}

This orientation towards phenomenology and an attention to bodily and sensory ways of being-in-the-world were my focus when filming the multi-species, multi-sensory, social engagement between herders and herd animals in Mongolia. I could not have foreseen the stylistic turn towards observation and aesthetics in ethnographic filmmaking as a genre, nor the emergence of multi-species ethnography, but it is nice to know that I am not alone in my endeavours. In the future I hope that more researchers take a similar approach and incorporate both of these exciting and emerging areas of anthropology in their research, combining a multi-species approach to research with multi-sensory etho-ethnographic filmmaking.

\textsuperscript{31} MacDougall, D. 2007, \textit{Schoolscapes}, [Film; 77 mins], Ronin Films, Canberra.
\textsuperscript{32} Grimshaw, ‘The bellwether ewe’, p. 259.
Beyond all Utterance: Reflections on the making of the films *Memoirs of a Plague* and *Locusts: Creatures of the flood*

Robert Nugent

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks.

— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

This paper reflects on the making of two very different films by the author. Both films were on the same subject: our relationship with locusts. One film, *Memoirs of a Plague*, was a personal inquiry, informed by an ethnographic filmmaking approach. The other film, *Locusts: Creatures of the flood*, was created from the same source material as *Memoirs of a Plague*, but was made for an international cable television channel, according to the demand for a magazine-style documentary.

![Locust invasion on the road to Tiznit, French Morocco, Nov 1954](image)

Source: Food and Agriculture Organisation (photo by Studies du Souissi, Rabat)

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Background

In 2008 I started making an independent film called *Memoirs of a Plague*. The numerous journeys I undertook to make the film over the next three years took the form of a personal and idiosyncratic inquiry into locust control around the world. My initial thesis was that our reactions to the natural phenomenon of locusts may arise from long-held prejudices and myths, rather than the reality of the threat that they pose. The film was based on found situations where individuals and governments were confronting what they perceived to be a locust menace. The bulk of the funding for *Memoirs of a Plague* came from Screen Australia’s Innovation Program.

In the course of my filming of *Memoirs of a Plague*, National Geographic became interested in the project and commissioned the making of a television version. This was to be a bespoke film, which came to be called *Locusts: Creatures of the flood*. It was to be made from the same source material as *Memoirs of a Plague*.³

While the cinematography in both films was inspired by National Geographic’s leadership in natural history filmmaking, the film that I was to make for them would have to conform to a style to which their audiences had become accustomed. A commissioning editor explicitly told me that the form of *Memoirs of a Plague* was completely unsuitable for the audience to which they marketed their films; however, there was no manual to explain this difference or the process by which *Memoirs of a Plague* needed to be reconfigured for television.

The stark difference in logic instantiated in *Memoirs of a Plague* and *Locusts: Creatures of the Flood*, and the approaches to filmmaking they stand for, is revealed when we reflect upon the way the two films were constructed. In what follows, I will compare and discuss some aspects of the making of the two films. I hope this discussion may contribute to critical understandings of how different the process of filmmaking can be when confronting the same subject. My own filmmaking practice has been strongly influenced by ethnographic films, modelled on the approach of filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, David MacDougall and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. In this spirit, I approached the filming of *Memoirs of a Plague* as an open-ended inquiry. I attempted to incorporate a sense of the process of filming as well as acknowledging my own relationship to the subject.

In the case of *Creatures of the Flood*, the approach was to be very different. I was aware that this film was to be created as content for a market dominated by television-style documentary films, and where it is expected such films will provide an audience with both questions and answers.

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³ *Memoirs of a Plague* ran to 77 minutes in length. *Creatures of a Flood* was contractually required to be exactly 52 minutes long, which is the specified length of a television program hour.
Reflections on the making of the films Memoirs of a Plague and Locusts: Creatures of the flood

Filmic Beginnings

*Moby Dick* inhabited my mind in 2007. I was nearing the end of three years of work on my film *End of the Rainbow*. Reading about whales and the ocean was one way of escaping the intensity of finishing the film. I was fascinated by Ahab’s obsessive pursuit of Moby Dick. The white whale speaks for many hounded creatures. This association led me to develop an idea I already had for a film on locusts—a subject that had interested me since my employment as a field officer with the Australian Plague Locust Commission when I first left university. I chose to ignore Herman Melville’s advice. He cautioned against casting a character such as a locust: ‘To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be who have tried it.’

In 2008 I began a cinematic investigation into the phenomenon of locusts in our imaginations. I set myself the task of not using an expositional voice-over, which is a common device in the filmmaker’s toolkit. I wanted to rely on the power of the cinematic image of the locusts, and their hunters, as the primary means to convey the story as I found it through the lens of a camera.

In adopting this approach, I was also influenced by the way ethnographic filmmakers may use cinema to explore a subject that is initially unfamiliar to them. From my own experience, this means crossing a cultural threshold, with a camera in hand. I find you must put aside, as much as this is possible, any sense of a predetermined dramatic premise. If there was drama in the human conflict with locusts, I set myself the task of discerning it through what I could record with the camera. As ethnographic filmmakers have done before me, I was leaving my own world behind and allowing myself to be confronted with the immensity of the present moment. When you initially cross this threshold anything and everything can be of significance to your recording device—which of course you are always aware you will take back to your own world. At the beginning of such a crossing I find my camera could just as well be mounted on NASA’s *Mars Explorer* or the barrel of a tank (as it was in a film that I made when I spent a month with the Australian Army in Iraq in 2006 as a war artist).

After entering the world of the locust hunters, I became familiar with the people I met and their quest to find and kill locusts. As it was not my intention to make a natural history film, their personal motivations and intentions were of more significance to me than the locusts they hunted. The relationship that

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developed between myself, as the filmmaker, and my subjects became crucial to the film, and for me this is one of the hallmarks of ethnographic filmmaking and of ethnographic inquiry.

I had been inspired by the relationship Jean Rouch had with his subjects when he made *Jaguar*, which had informed my earlier film *End of the Rainbow*. There are many examples of cross-cultural relationships that develop between the filmmakers and their subjects in ethnographic films (for example, *Room 11, Ethiopian Hotel* and *Koriam’s Law*). I believe, however, there is no one particular method or approach that distinguishes an ‘ethnographic film’, though the question is often asked.

In setting out to make the film on locusts in the way that I was proceeding, I was encouraged by the theoretical writings of Bill Nichols, who argued that ethnographic filmmakers ‘in their meditations on scientific method and visual communication, have done the most provocative experimentation’.10

In my pocket, however, I always carried Robert Bresson’s *Notes on the Cinematographer*, which ostensibly has nothing at all to do with ethnographic film. It is more a collection of personal responses and aphorisms that Bresson compiled during his filmmaking practice. In my mind, he had formulated a response to Melville’s entreaty to never make a film on a flea (or a locust in my case) when he said ‘[a] small subject can provide the pretext for many profound combinations. [But] avoid subjects that are too vast and remote, in which nothing warns you are going astray. Or else take from them only what can be mingled with your life and belongs to your experience.’11 For me, this advice fits well with the rubric of ethnographic film.

Béla Balázs writes, ‘The realities of nature are given their deepest meaning for man if presented as a social experience’,12 so an inquiry informed by ethnographic research approaches and the entreaty of André Bazin to recognise ‘cinema as language’13 seemed an eminently suitable way of investigating responses to such a protean being as the locust.

This investigation began in January 2008 when I travelled from Australia to Ethiopia. The outcome was far from certain. My trip, however, was not a

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8 Kawase, I. 2006, *Room 11*, and *Ethiopian Hotel*, Kyoto University, Japan.
Reflections on the making of the films Memoirs of a Plague and Locusts: Creatures of the flood

completely speculative exercise. Much time and scientific resources are devoted to forecasting the occurrence of locusts. The web site of the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) reported that they were likely to be in the south of the country. The locusts had apparently flown in from the Ogaden, which was an area off limits to locust-monitoring efforts because of the war in Somalia. In Addis Ababa, I hired a car and driver and spent several days following news of the locusts.

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Ethiopia lies across Africa’s huge Rift Valley. It is breathtakingly beautiful. My eyes, accustomed to the low-slung landscapes of Australia, found the country hard to read. Such is the scale of the Rift Valley that you can drive for hours towards a volcano and never seem nearer. I followed stories of locusts to the Konso area of southern Ethiopia.

When I arrived there, miraculously it seemed, before me was a tableau of human interaction with locusts. I had not expected to be quite so quickly confronted with a particular dilemma of exploratory filmmaking. How to maintain a critical distance from your subject? Usually I find this is done by building experience within the world you have entered, and getting to know the people, keeping notes and watching your daily ‘rushes’, which allows the filmmaker time to build up a sense of how the images are ‘working’. It helps to build a director’s sense of what the story is in cinematic terms. In southern Ethiopia I had no time for this. Filmmaking, ethnographic or not, is primarily a very physical activity, which requires stamina and practice, mixed with just such moments of serendipity. I needed to physically immerse myself in a rapidly unfolding and ephemeral event. The sudden appearance of the locusts understandably panicked the villagers. Though they had never seen them before, they believed that their livelihoods were threatened. Pesticides were deployed. The Desert Locust Control Organisation for East Africa sent a sixty-year-old Dehaviland Beaver spray aircraft from Nairobi, flown by the charismatic Captain Aralleh, who became my Captain Ahab, as I was swept into his quest to find and kill the swarm.

The scene that I encountered in southern Ethiopia shows the fear, confusion and chaos that locusts cause. The film of their arrival is suitably dramatic and conforms to a popular part of the locust narrative. The plague had arrived out of nowhere. Villagers of all ages were running wildly about, cracking whips, beating bushes, banging drums and lighting fires to scare the locusts.

15 Rushes is the term now commonly used to describe ‘raw’ or unedited footage. It derives from the pre-digital practice in fiction filmmaking of quickly processing each day’s footage for viewing by the director.
16 To view this scene, see the end sequence of Memoirs of a Plague via the ANU E Press website at http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012
The Character of the Locust

In the locust there exists a character where science, powerful inbuilt narratives and norms of representation intersect in a singular way. Locusts can stand for many different things, and their narrative comes preloaded with metaphors. They have the power to elicit strong emotional responses. Pre-colonial shifting agricultural communities and nomadic tribes in Africa often regarded them as a sign of plenty.\(^\text{17}\) To societies built around sedentary agriculture and established land-tenure systems, the way that locusts seem to strike indiscriminately automatically casts them as pestilence.

Our war with locusts has been continuing for millennia. The battles, though dramatic, often lead to no clear victory. They take place today on the margins of the food bowls of Africa, Asia and the Middle East, in societies in which locusts are creatures of mythology as well as entomology, a source of food as well as a source of fear. When in plague, locusts evoke the threat of uncontrollable and malevolent nature, and may even be seen as a symptom of social and moral disintegration. Locust plagues are often associated with regions of conflict, and connections between locusts and war are manifold. While the science, chemicals and techniques have evolved, locust killing has changed little since the advent of the aerial application of insecticides, which was an idea borrowed from the use of aircraft to drop bombs. Today the most commonly applied chemical used in locust control has been derived from nerve gas used to kill humans during wartime.\(^\text{18}\) Even the occurrence of locusts frequently coincides with regions made inaccessible because of security concerns or warfare, as outlined by Brader and colleagues in their 2006 report to the FAO.\(^\text{19}\)

Locusts have a political dimension. As they are migratory creatures, they can flagrantly cross borders, which potentially can create disputes between neighbours. Individuals feel powerless in the face of invasion and so locusts seem to have been universally adopted as an insect for which the state bears primary responsibility. There is even a character set in the Chinese alphabet that designates the locust as belonging to the Emperor.

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\(^\text{17}\) Achebe, C. 1994 [1959], *Things Fall Apart*, Random House, New York. In this novel, the Igbo tribe saw locusts as a cause for celebration because they are a source of food.

\(^\text{18}\) These are the organophosphate class of chemicals, which kill by disrupting the signals between nerve synapses. The Germans first developed them as nerve gas during World War II.

Reflections on the making of the films Memoirs of a Plague and Locusts: Creatures of the flood

Figure 2 Chinese character for the Emperor’s insect: the locust

In response, large, publicly funded state, national and international organisations dedicated to locust forecasting and control have been established around the world.

One of the main distinguishing characteristics of a locust, as well as a prodigious ability to migrate, is its capacity to exist in two morphologically distinct phases. The desert locust, which is the creature referenced in the Bible and the one that had arrived unexpectedly in southern Ethiopia in January 2008, normally exists as a large, nimble, solitary, green grasshopper. With the right combination of rainfall and density of the insects, hormonal changes can be triggered in the animal. While this process is not completely understood, they then transform into something very different from a humble grasshopper. Over the course of one or two generations they may first turn pink and then become a bright-yellow, swarming creature. This usually occurs out of sight, in remote desert regions. The fact that one creature can manifest itself in a form that is morphologically distinct from its parents was discovered early in the past century by the father of locust science, Sir Boris Uvarov. He had found the source of the biblical plague. Until this revelation, locusts had always seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Though it was the first time locusts had appeared in southern Ethiopia in living memory, the villagers’ consternation was understandable. They may not have met locusts before but they knew their reputation. I found this to be a characteristic of how our memories of locusts are formed. Because as individuals we may encounter them so infrequently and unexpectedly, and the experience is so visually arresting, they tend to become a uniquely memorable event in our lives. They form an image in our minds that cannot be described in words alone. David MacDougall has described this as embodying ‘the gap between sensory experience and knowledge’.

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20 Locusts are grasshoppers and members of the taxonomic family *Acrididae.*
22 Locusts have gone on to become the world’s most studied insect and acridology, the study of grasshoppers and locusts, is a sub-branch of entomology.
Films about locusts form a prominent place in the genre of natural history documentaries, to the point where they could almost be regarded as a sub-genre.\textsuperscript{24} The locust is firmly typecast as the antagonist in this drama—a role reinforced and amplified by the media whenever locusts are reported. In a ‘locust film’, or a media headline, they are generally introduced by way of a reference to one of the many apocalyptic allusions to them in the Bible.\textsuperscript{25} In a memorable scene from Terrence Malick’s 1978 film, \textit{Days of Heaven}, based on the story of Cain and Abel, hapless wheat farmers try to scare off a swarm of locusts using burning torches. In the process, they manage to set on fire and destroy the crop they are trying to save.\textsuperscript{26} In Australia, the notorious bushranger Ned Kelly made use of the reputation of the locust. He ends his famous ‘Jerilderie Letter’ with the warning that if his words are neglected, ‘abide by the consequences, which shall be worse than…the grasshoppers in New South Wales’.\textsuperscript{27}

In contrast with their significance in our imaginations, a locust swarm is a surprisingly ephemeral and, in any one location, quite a rare event. Stephen Simpson, a pre-eminent locust scientist, provides the compelling, but unverified,

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item Examples include the classics: Gordon, D. 1956, \textit{The Ruthless One}, Shell Film Unit, UK; and Hankinson, M. 1953, \textit{Teeth of the Wind}, World Wide Pictures, London.
  \item Although most documentaries about locusts do not quote Leviticus 11:22, which informs man that locusts are a good source of food.
  \item Kelly, E. 1879, \textit{The Jerilderie Letter}, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.
\end{itemize}
statistic that one in ten people in the world has had their life affected by locusts; however, it would seem that for most of us the sight of them in plague proportions may only be a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse.

There are many claims made in the scientific literature of locusts causing substantial crop losses; however, the language used to describe this outcome is often framed by the word ‘perceived’. Conspicuously absent from the locust narrative is any published hard evidence that they alone cause widespread famine or even minor regional food-supply problems. During the three years that I worked as a field officer with the Australian Government’s Plague Locust Commission, I pursued the insects over much of inland Australia and saw many swarms. I participated in the great plague of 1984 (in the literature, locust plagues, like other natural disasters, are always referred to by the year in which they occur) but I never witnessed the wide areas of barren fields they are supposed to leave in their wake. The many farmers and scientists whom I met always referred to their destructive capacity, though the reporting of damage caused by locusts was usually very subjective. One possible source of the attribution of major crop losses to locusts is the application of what appears to be self-evident logic. It is a part of locust lore that each insect will eat its own weight in food (it is presumed to be our food) every day; however, locusts don’t always feed in this way throughout their life cycle, and they prefer certain foods over others. For instance, in the large desert locust plague that occurred in Pakistan in 1993, high-density swarms occupied thousands of square kilometres of the Thar Desert, which lies directly next to Pakistan’s Indus River food basin, yet very few crops were attacked. I was employed there at the time as the United Nation’s Food and Agriculture advisor and was present throughout the plague. Yet on witnessing those massive swarms of locusts, and knowing any one of them could contain a biomass equivalent to that of a sperm whale, I too have known the uncertainty that they cause. As Ishmael said of the ocean that Moby Dick swam through: ‘It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all’.1

Locusts, as characters in the film I was researching, were that ungraspable phantom: a state of mind. The subject I was investigating was not the locust itself, but our response to them. Their narrative was not the story of the ‘evil other’, but the story of our need to control uncertainty. In closely observing and

30 Brader, ‘Towards a more effective response to desert locusts’. Losses attributed to locusts often occur in the presence of compounding factors such as food insecurity caused by other causes, rural poverty, isolation, political expediency, exaggerated or misinformed reporting, lack of governance, social dislocation, warfare, and so on.
31 Melville, Moby Dick, p. 5.
filming people’s interactions with locusts, wherever I could find them, I hoped I would be able to create a film that critiqued this need and, more broadly, our relationship with the natural world.

One way of doing this was to refrain from using a classic natural history expository voice-over during the macro-photography of the life cycle of the locust. In film language, extreme close-ups generally invite an audience to associate more strongly with the point of view of a character by drawing the viewer into their point of view. By not utilising a voice-over relaying scientific facts and explaining that the locust is the antagonist in the drama being portrayed, I hoped viewers may come to reassess their own ways of seeing and knowing a subject. By not casting the locust as an antagonist, I aimed to allow viewers a range of possible responses, including associating with the locust as a protagonist.

After Ethiopia, I made numerous trips over the next three years to film locust-control efforts in Egypt, Tanzania and Australia. As a locust swarm is not a prescribed event, the situations that I found myself filming were unique each time, and I chose to document them in that way.

**Memoirs of a Plague**

A range of stories appears in *Memoirs of a Plague*. Each explores different aspects of our relationship with locusts. The film uses cinematic devices such as associative editing, where the viewer is invited to make connections between scenes and interwoven storylines. Stories of love, fear and even boredom are assembled as a pastiche, in the way experiences may be jotted down in a travel diary. Farmers, officialdom and scientific researchers all make cameo appearances. They also appear as inherently incidental to the natural world that the locusts inhabit. The creatures are born, grow, migrate, reproduce and die, supremely indifferent to their effect on our imaginations and fears. The life cycle of the locust structures the film. It is presented in a conventional natural history film form, except that there is no voice-over explaining the images.

In contrast, my first-person voice-over narration threads through *Memoirs of a Plague* as a reflexive inner voice. This was constructed from notes that I kept while making the film, as I felt the need to frame images by reflecting on my own search for the ‘plague’. The approach was influenced by, among others, the work of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash. In filming *Sweetgrass*, Castaing-Taylor seeks to represent the flux of life with an ethnographic eye, propelled by an artistic sensibility. The way the camera lingers on subjects in *Sweetgrass* invites the audience to see along with the filmmaker. This subjective framing becomes the voice of Taylor-Castaing. The voice that I developed to place myself within my research ended up being a rhetorical device. If I never found the scourge of the plague, where does it exist except as a state of mind? Does our conditioning condemn us to always react in the same way?

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**View Opening Sequence from *Memoirs of a Plague***

*Memoirs of a Plague* starts off with the proposition that I had entered a world permanently at war with the uncontrollable forces of nature. Archival footage restates long-held views on locusts, followed by a scene that is in the style of a horror film. A mother is trapped in a car with her screaming children as a locust swarm engulfs them. She questions her fate by asking, ‘Why now?’ My voice casts her question in the broader context of all our lives. In the next scene, an unidentified person’s arm is being tattooed with the image of a locust. The visceral nature of this procedure is conveyed by extreme close-up shots. I leave it up to the audience to reflect on the image of a locust forming on bloodied skin, and the decision to have it permanently placed there. My own voice reappears occasionally throughout the film as a querulous and infrequent inner reflection on my own subjective reactions—but it is uncertain and propositional.

After the title sequence of *Memoirs of a Plague*, I appear suddenly in a horse-drawn buggy next to two people. In the background there is an aeroplane that has run out of fuel. We are in a situation that none of us can control and we are heading for an unknown destination, surrounded by the cacophony of life.

![Figure 4 The author (right) in Ethiopia in February 2008, with two characters from *Memoirs of a Plague*: Captain Mohammed Arralleh (left) and Engineer Simon (centre)](image)

Source: Still image taken from *Memoirs of a Plague* (2011)

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34 This was one of several cinematic tropes that *Memoirs of a Plague* employed that National Geographic requested not appear in *Creatures of the Flood*. 
A Comparison with the Television Version, *Creatures of the Flood*

The process of constructing *Creatures of the Flood*, and conforming it for television, involved re-editing *Memoirs of a Plague* to meet the needs of a major television distribution company. Finding out what these needs were was, in a practical sense, straightforward. We would send the commissioning editors rough cuts of the film that was to become *Locusts: Creatures of the Flood* and they would send us back a list of their requirements and suggestions for changes.

The first major requirement for *Creatures of the Flood* was for narration, which must be delivered in the third person via an unidentified voice. They wanted words to explain the images and sequences. So, in contrast with *Memoirs of a Plague*, *Creatures of the Flood* starts off with an anonymous voice-over, reiterating the relationship between man and locusts. This voice introduces the premise that locusts may not be the evil creatures we think they are. The voice also implicitly tells an audience that a narrator is going to lead them through the film they are about to watch.

- View Opening Sequence from *Creatures of the Flood*[^15]

In *Memoirs of a Plague* one of my aims was to raise questions about the genesis of our understanding of locusts. We develop our responses to the natural world very early in our lives. The scene from *Memoirs of a Plague* that takes place in a kindergarten in Coonamble in New South Wales shows children being instructed in the collective enterprise of finding and killing all locusts. It was a request that this scene not appear in *Creatures of the Flood*.

The locust scout, whom we meet in *Memoirs of a Plague* in a car in the Egyptian desert, is a Bedouin nomad from the Ababda tribe. The Ababda traditionally provided transport and guide services across the Eastern Arabian Desert, which runs along the western coastline of the Red Sea in Egypt. In the film M’Hd is fulfilling his traditional role of scout and guide for the Egyptian locust service scientists. I was interested in his relationship with the government officials. He seemed relegated to a defined role and excluded from the generation of a ‘scientific understanding’ of locusts. I wanted to focus on his way of viewing the desert as opposed to the way that the government officials and scientists come to understand locusts and the desert. The locust scout provides an alternative way of knowing locusts, one that is based on traditional knowledge and understandings of place and landscape. The scenes from Egypt were not required to appear in the television version because the character of the locust

scout, and the intentions of the scientists to find the locusts, would have had to be explained rather than observed. Apparently a television audience could not be expected to make such subtle connections on their own.

In *Memoirs of a Plague*, a vivisection scene follows from the ideas set up by the search for locusts in Egypt. The Ababda locust scout represented a relationship with nature vastly different from that of the scientists he was leading into it. In the lab it could be one of these same scientists whose gloved hand manipulates the locust. The use of extreme macro-photography amplifies its vulnerability and individuality. The scene invites the audience to empathise with the locust’s plight. Again, the distribution company asked that this scene not appear, as it was deemed too graphic.

As they are cold blooded, locusts need to warm themselves in the sun. When they are warm enough they are very skittish creatures and difficult to film. While we have little idea how they perceive the world, as the voice of the scientist tells us, they are certainly very sensitive to movement. The slightest hint of a looming object will cause them to instantaneously vanish from the screen. But if locusts are cooled they become compliant actors. To film the diorama used at the end of *Memoirs of a Plague*, the locust that appears in the shot had been captured in a net and placed in an ice-filled box until it was too cool to hop away. Before it could warm up, I reached in and repositioned it, so that it could be filmed sitting on the rock in profile. When the film was edited I decided to show the shot of my hand moving the locust to signify my manipulating presence. Is it the hand of God re-establishing the natural order, or the hand of man, who can never stop controlling events? The shot had to be cut from *Creatures of the Flood* because it was once again too open to interpretation.
While I had been able to pursue open-ended ideas in *Memoirs of a Plague*—and indeed the impossibility of tying the locust down to one kind of certainty or interpretation was central to the filmmaking process—I found that the locust story is not so easily questioned when it comes to making a version for a television audience. As David MacDougall once pointed out in a conversation with Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash:

> It is often difficult for people who express themselves through words to accept a form of communication that works so much through suggestion, implication, reference, ambiguity and comparison without conclusion. It can be frustrating for them. And there’s the tendency to try and push it in a direction of being more definitive. Therefore there’s always a demand for further contextualisation, for narration.  

MacDougall was referring to collaborations between filmmakers and anthropologists but the same dilemma occurred in my relationship with a major distribution network.

In a television documentary of the sort that I was constructing, any information is often framed by the notion that what the audience is told is something unique. New knowledge appears miraculously from ‘science’. This knowledge is often withheld for dramaturgical purposes and then revealed as a startling new fact to the audience. It is explained through words, not images, in much the same way as many scientific texts work. It is assumed that for learning to take place in the viewer, they must be told facts. Deploying adjectives freely throughout the narration often propels sequences in such films. The narration is generally delivered breathlessly in a state of hyper-awareness and certainty. Time constraints faced by protagonists and a sense of jeopardy, explained by the voice-over, often provide the dramatic structure of this form of film. The spoken word sets up and structures the film by introducing and explaining the meaning and flow of all images and sequences. This can have the effect of rendering images meaningless unless there is an accompanying voice-over, while the words often advance independently of the images, with the same logic as expository written text. This interplay of image and voice is easy enough to test by turning down the sound on the television and seeing what sense can be made of the image flow, and then listening to the narration without watching the screen.

Andreas Ackermann has noted how the viewing and interpretation of an ethnographic film may transcend the intentions of the filmmaker, with the form of the film inviting viewers to imagine odours, taste food and listen to

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38 Examples are numerous. In the locust sub-genre, they include cable TV documentaries such as Animal Planet’s *Swarm Chasers* (2009) and National Geographic’s *Perfect Swarm* (2005).
sounds in a way that creates an experience that savours the world of the other.\textsuperscript{39} The viewers of television content are generally not allowed this opportunity because of the hegemony of words. Bresson had considered such a filmic form and concluded that by giving ‘preponderance’ to words, their sound can negate or even ‘kill’ an appreciation of the image.\textsuperscript{40} He was well aware that words have the capacity to negate the mimetic affect that an image can create.

Content for television is a curated piece of media that is commissioned to follow a particular form or provide a consistent institutional voice.\textsuperscript{41} It will then fit comfortably in a predetermined slot in a television schedule or multimedia platform. Content can be designed, manufactured, packaged and sold to a mass market. This definition of content draws on my personal experience in pitching my locust film idea to the television commissioning editors at the Australian International Documentary Conference in Adelaide in 2009. Television commissioning editors commonly describe themselves as ‘content seekers’ at such events. Gary Kildea succinctly identified this form that they were seeking: he simply called them ‘about’ films.\textsuperscript{42} A film with locusts as ‘content’ was always going to mean the intervention of some form of exposition explaining the dramatic premise of their often-told story. In this form of film there is an implicit need to control what the film is ‘about’ for the audience so its content can be sold in a marketplace. To me, the imposition of a controlling narrative felt ironically similar to our need to control the locust itself. Dai Vaughan has noted that, in a sense, filming and the act of framing an image are always ‘about’ something,\textsuperscript{43} whereas the reality of life and the effervescent world around us, including locusts, are not ‘about’ anything. It is only when we peer at it through a recording device—the camera or the prism of own memories and beliefs—that our desire to impose a story is exposed.

\section*{Conclusion}

The approach of ethnographic filmmaking significantly shaped my inquiry into locusts, enabling me to roam around our relationship with these creatures and their images, without feeling the need to impose a predetermined narrative structure on my investigation. I was led by my background research, my relationship with my subjects, an understanding of their motivations and the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Ackermann} Ackermann, A. 2011, Sensory patterns of culture: on researching social aesthetics, The 2011 Humanities Research Centre Seminar Series, 20 September, Research School of Humanities, The Australian National University, Canberra.
\bibitem{Bresson} Bresson, Notes on the Cinematographer.
\bibitem{Kildea} Kildea, G. 2011, Personal communication.
\end{thebibliography}
use of a camera to observe their actions as social and cultural phenomena. The fact that locusts had an established narrative form in natural history films, and an established place in our imaginations, allowed me to present the subject in unexpected ways. I was also able to engage with this world by allowing the subject to become a source of wonder, rather than merely a source of information.

What I learnt from re-versioning the film for television was that it is not so easy to change the way people find meaning and consider things they believe they already know. As MacDougall has observed, there is an inner fear created by the act of looking, for, in looking, we may see ‘the skull beneath the skin, the horror’. We may be forced to acknowledge that we cannot control or contain all meanings that a film presents to an inquiring and critical gaze.

The use of voice-over narration is one of the primary forms in television documentary. I found that this tends to lock down meaning, rather than leaving the process of meaning-making open to the viewer’s own encounter with material put before them. While Memoirs of a Plague utilised voice-over as an integral element of the film, this aimed at establishing disquiet, uncertainty and openness as the underlying sensibilities of the film. Such an approach runs directly counter to the ethos of the television documentary form. By the imposition of an explanatory voice-over, the viewer is excluded from a more open association with the images and sequences. This has a tendency to eviscerate any meaning that a sequence of images may potentially create for an audience, as the words impose and control the narrative. The image, and its role in the narrative of the film, is subordinated under their weight.

Memoirs of a Plague contemplates our need for certainty and control over nature. In Creatures of the Flood that need was played out in the demand to supply controlled and marketable content for television. The two films have different lives. One screens at film festivals; the other waits to be slotted into the program schedules of cable television channels around the world. One is an attempt to represent a series of open-ended ideas and the other is designed for its content. Memoirs of a Plague is very partial and propositional. Creatures of the Flood offers completeness and certainty. Memoirs of a Plague sets out to savour our relationship with the natural world; the other sets out to contain the frame of both questions and answers.

But although they are very different films they are forever linked, in my mind at least, in a way not dissimilar to the locust’s capacity to exist in two forms.

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45 In 2010 Memoirs of a Plague screened at IDFA (Amsterdam), and in 2011 at the Margaret Mead Film Festival (New York), Hot Docs (Toronto), i Docs (Beijing), Mostra de Ciencia e Cinema (the International Science Film Festival, Coruña, Galicia, Spain), Canberra International Film Festival (Canberra) and Antenna Doc Fest (Sydney).
Reflections on the making of the films Memoirs of a Plague and Locusts: Creatures of the flood

Melville of course had something to say on the ambiguities of our relationship with beasts: ‘O’ Nature, and O’ soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies.’

Knowing Stillness

Penelope Moore

Daisy: I’m totally into this thing of whatever you’re doing, just being there and being yourself. I mean, not trying to do something above or below, just trying to be very honest and very open. In a performance the best and the strongest performance is always when you are extremely relaxed. Being relaxed is not about being lethargic—it’s just about being relaxed and then you are incredibly aware and incredibly there, and all your deepest power comes through.

Margaret: Nothing is inhibiting that flow.

Daisy: Yes…so it doesn’t matter so much if you’ve practised or not actually; it’s how you feel at that moment.

Yu: It’s how you feel, yeah, completely!

Daisy: You just live. And if you let anything that happens…Because for me the strongest challenge in a concert, just like anything in life, is—anytime I make a mistake, it doesn’t matter. And you look at the next moment as if that moment [of making a mistake] hasn’t come. Because then you’re only in the next moment. And the audience—if you live like that—the audience will never even notice you’ve made a mistake. And if you don’t live like that and you don’t perform like that, they will not notice you’ve made a mistake either, but they will not feel that things are so powerfully coming across any more because they will know that you’re somewhere else, you’re not so there.

Yu: Well, you’re in the negative. You’re being pulled by this having made a mistake thing. [Yu mimes pulling a string behind her head, as if it was attached to her and pulling her backwards.]

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1 From the Introductory Sequence: ‘Being Yourself’.
Introduction

This article draws on ethnographic work with professional musicians in Vienna to explore the activity of musical performance. In particular, I draw on my work in both film and text to identify and elucidate a skilled practice by which professional musicians are able to produce great performances with consistency. Performance is not just a matter of technical acuity in playing an instrument. It is a communicative act that involves the bringing together of a diverse range of skills, techniques, practices and abilities while playing. Musicians hold such knowledge at different levels of awareness, bringing aspects of it to consciousness as needed while they play. In and through this article, I argue...
that, during performance, connections are made between actions, perceptions, thoughts and intentions that only emerge in a kind of stillness. This ‘stillness’ facilitates a communicative performance.

In this article, I demonstrate the concept and practice of ‘stillness’ as they hold significance in the lives of the musicians I worked with. I do this by drawing connections through a variety of different ethnographic material, both filmic and written. I show how thinking with a camera, and working with the strengths of filmmaking processes, allowed me to arrive at and elaborate the concept of ‘stillness’. In my exploration of stillness, I use different ethnographic examples—some audiovisual, some written—to access knowledge that is not conventionally found through text and processes of writing. This provides an example of how we can know things differently through the visual and through an engagement with different kinds of material thinking—specifically in this case, the materiality of film and filmmaking processes.⁴

What I am calling ‘stillness’ is characterised by the ability to make many different elements come together in synthesis at the right moments. In developing the concept of stillness, I endeavour to show it to be a skilled process, linked to a way of being, through which years of making music and the diversity of skills this involves are gathered into the moments of playing. Stillness, which I link with ‘being-in-the-moment’ (a turn of phrase that some musicians do use), is, paradoxically, filled with a history of professional and non-professional activity, technical practice and previous performance experiences.⁵ Therefore, stillness should not be associated with an absence of activity but, rather, configured as the concentration of a diverse history of activity, tailored to the task at hand. The time it takes to learn a musical piece, and all the tasks and associated skills that go into it, is hidden in the moments of playing.

Bringing aspects of musical knowledge to consciousness in the moments when they are most needed involves being responsive to the changing environment during the stream of performance activity. To do this requires holding a practised awareness of body and being and the particular transformations that music making affords. At the same time, it involves musicians maintaining a confidence in their own ability to play the music so that, in the moments of

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⁴ In my research, I used a digital video camera to do my filming. In this article, the term ‘film’ is also intended to encompass digital and/or video material, equipment and processes.

⁵ In using the term ‘being-in-the-moment’, I am conscious of the work of philosophers such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty who have discussed being in great depth. While phenomenology and existential anthropology have provided inspiration for me throughout my research, my decision to use terms like ‘being-in-the-moment’ stems primarily from discussions I had with musicians during fieldwork, since this is part of the language that they themselves use when trying to express their own experiences and practices of music making. In this article, I focus on developing an understanding of their music worlds through ethnography, exploring the methods and potentials of visual anthropology. In doing so, I leave an engagement with the literature of phenomenological and existential anthropology for another place. Likewise, I do not use this article to address the literature around performance theory, embodiment or place.
musical synthesis, consciousness of the body does not intrude on the flow of making. I also suggest that stillness can be a tangible quality for musicians, which is identified, understood, practised and striven for in order to achieve the level of artistry required for professional musical performance.

Building an Argument through Both Film and Text

In Part One of this article, I discuss several sequences of film footage edited from ethnographic audiovisual material that each contribute to the project of showing and knowing stillness. I reflect upon filming observationally and processes of editing, discussing some of the ways in which those processes have helped me to better understand musicians’ experience and practice. Following this, I draw on the presented material to make connections to further explain stillness (Part Two). I introduce some other ethnographic and anthropological material that has a bearing on developing an understanding of stillness in this section.

I intend to stick close to the ethnographic material in visual and other forms in order to explore practices and experiences that were an important part of music making for the musicians I worked with. Using a montage technique and aesthetic to build up a picture from a variety of sources, I aim to give a sense of stillness as a skilled practice, what it entails and its significance for musicians. It is my hope that this will provide one platform for reflection on current issues and debates in the areas of visual, digital and sensory anthropology. In particular, I wish to contribute to the current project of the sub-discipline of visual anthropology to explore and examine how using audiovisual techniques and technologies might transform, enhance and work in juxtaposition with more conventional methods in anthropology. I intend my work to be read, viewed and conceptualised in a filmic as well as a textual mode—as a kind of cinematic argument. This will allow me to incorporate the filmic and the textual, the conceptual and the sensory, the inter-subjective spaces of being and the analytical and expository directions of meaning, and to build them into an overall synthesis.6

The approach I take is developed through engagement with the texts and films of visual anthropology, and through my research using audiovisual technologies. Doing anthropology with a video camera in its most fundamental practical aspects most closely associates with phenomenological methodologies and existential anthropology. These bring us from ‘abstract questions concerning objective knowledge of the world to existential questions concerning how people are actually living in the world of objects and others’.7 It is from this

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6 David MacDougall makes this distinction between meaning and being, linking them to different kinds of knowledge, both conceptual and perceptual. MacDougall, D. 2006, The Corporeal Image: Film, ethnography and the senses, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, pp. 5–6.

methodology—‘a way of according equal weight to all modalities of human experience’—that my research and approach to anthropology emerge and develop.

There are a variety of ways in which visual and audio technologies can be incorporated into fieldwork, depending on the research project and the approach of the researcher. My aim in taking a camera to Vienna was to film material that I would later edit into an ethnographic film. David MacDougall writes that before filmmakers can edit images, ‘they have had to film them, and this has required looking’. Looking while filming holds its own analytic sense, separate from conceptual thinking. This careful looking is not so much about concentration as ‘being attentive and free of distractions’. Using a camera to do anthropology, then, allows for an alternative engagement with people and place, one that enriches understanding of sensory knowledge and allows reflection on the meaning of observation itself for anthropology. David MacDougall writes: ‘To look carefully requires strength, calmness, and affection. The affection cannot be in the abstract; it must be an affection of the senses.’ My intent, then, was to engage with visual anthropology primarily through observational cinema. This has several important implications that I introduce here and work with in this article. The first is that observational cinema prompts a stance from the ethnographer that centres on intense, engaged and specific relationships with people as they go about their lives. This means having to be in place in a sensory way. The senses and affect are therefore integral to both developing and communicating my research. Another aspect is that film itself offers a material engagement at both filming and editing stages that holds its own analytic potential for anthropology.

Part One: Recognising Stillness

More than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood.
Film-work, in my research, has been an important process for developing an understanding of musicians’ practices and experiences of music making. In developing this understanding of playing music and the associated concept of ‘stillness’, filming held more significance than I had imagined. My use of film, particularly here, became a way to ‘vision’ my field and to manifest ‘experience by experience’.

One of the difficulties of giving clarity to the concept of ‘stillness’ has been the problem of providing a description, in words, of a concept that is not directly articulated in that way or any other by musicians themselves. The concept is thus elusive. There is a sense that the more you talk around it, the more difficult it becomes to maintain a feeling of its importance for musicians. Like many of the meaningful aspects of music and music making, stillness is beyond words alone. In my own anthropological practice, I have had the opportunity to discover and explore this through a combination of film and text-based thinking.

![Figure 2 Still image from Meditation Sequence](image)

**View Sequence Two: ‘Meditation’**

This meditation sequence is the second sequence to view. The filming has taken place inside Daisy’s apartment. Although the interior is small, this scene constructs a space that is connected to a wider journey. As the sequence plays out, the meditation is associated with a musical performance, which resonates with the attitude practised and conveyed during the meditation.

During my stay in Vienna, Daisy found a meditation teacher who she really loved. She had sessions with the teacher at both her teacher’s premises and her own apartment. A number of times, Daisy invited me and one other friend to go along. At that time in her life, meditation was very important to her. She said that meditating gave her more energy and a sense of focus that allowed her to stay fully involved in her music-making projects and activities, seeing them through right until the end. Meditation helped her to maintain attention and motivation throughout a particular project. And through meditation Daisy felt that she was even more successful in her aim of ‘staying in the moment’ while performing.

I was struck by the atmosphere of quiet attention during these meditation sessions and very much wanted to include this in my filming of Daisy. It was rare to spend time with Daisy when she was not working energetically in one way or another. While she did spend time alone, cycling and jogging, and very much enjoyed the space this created for herself, those activities were difficult to film in process. She emphasised to me the importance of maintaining such a space in her life and the feeling this gave her. She was also protective of this space.

The filming of the meditation sequence did not come about as Daisy and I had envisaged, as the teacher was uncomfortable with the idea of being filmed; however, she was happy for me to film only Daisy while she was leading the meditation session. At the time, I was pleased to be able to film some of the quieter moments in Daisy’s life, particularly in order to provide a contrast with the active, busy feel of the other filming I had done. In part, I did this in order to enhance (filmically) the significance of her energetic engagements with life.

Processes of Filmmaking and the Making of Anthropological Knowledge

Watching, I breathe again.  
Breathe in the rhythms of meditation.  
Deeply, with awareness and relaxed concentration.
This description of a filming moment was written as I watched my rushes.\textsuperscript{15} I have included it here to emphasise the importance of the rhythms of film by giving a sense of the rhythm of breathing deeply. It was in reviewing the rushes for this sequence, and in making a rough assembly of shots, that I recognised the significance of ‘stillness’.\textsuperscript{16}

Filming and Viewing

This meditation footage can be experienced in two ways that are significant for this discussion. The first promotes an experience from within, a visceral engagement with the meditative moment. This ability of film to give a sense of being there, a visceral connection to what we view, is connected to film’s mimetic possibilities.\textsuperscript{17} The second is to take a more distanced perspective from which to focus on the scene before you (as a viewer) and perhaps notice the stillness of the camera over the time of the shot. The camera is hand-held and the footage conveys my own involvement as cameraperson in the meditation. When I edit the footage, I take a different perspective: viewing the material from that distance allows for analytical reflection. This perspective allows me to reflect on what is communicated through this shot, for example. The film material thus became a way to reflect on a given activity both from within the experience of it and from a more distanced position. As film viewers, in these moments of meditation with Daisy, we are able to join her breathing and enter with her into the rhythms of her world. This same quality is one I recognised in other material too. For example, it was a quality that was clear in some performance footage and could also be discerned amongst the repetitions of phrases in moments of instrument practice, rehearsal and improvisation.

Viewing My Rushes

Viewing rushes in preparation for editing was a process of engagement through repeated watching and logging.\textsuperscript{18} The aim of this was to gain a greater level of

\begin{itemize}
  \item Rushes are the raw, unedited footage of a film.
  \item I had written a little about this quality of stillness in my field notes; however, editing and viewing my film material and associating that with thoughts and descriptions in my field notes, as well as snippets of conversation with musicians, were what drew out the significance of this for my anthropology. A discussion with Amanda Ravetz helped me cement this, too. Amanda had viewed my first rough cut and also recognised stillness as an important quality in my filming with Daisy.
  \item Laura Marks’ book \textit{The Skin of the Film} discusses this. Marks, L. 2000, \textit{The Skin of the Film: Intercultural cinema, embodiment, and the senses}, Duke University Press, London. See also Grimshaw and Ravetz (\textit{Observational Cinema}, pp. 134–6, 139), who discuss how, in their words, ‘Taussig’s recuperation of the mimetic (following Benjamin) becomes valuable in understanding the unusual dynamic at the heart of observational work’ (p. 139). Taussig has written that ‘[t]he wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power’. Taussig, M. 1993, \textit{Mimesis and Alterity, A Particular History of the Senses}, Routledge, London, p. xiii.
  \item Logging is a process of recording shots in order to keep track of filmed material. I would record details such as time code, reel number, scene, location, participants, subject matter, quality and kinds of shot, and significant dialogue.
\end{itemize}
familiarity with the material from which the film would be crafted, leading to an emphasis on the filmic qualities of the material. I have argued elsewhere that film enables an engagement with aesthetic presence and the sensual realities of life as a professional musician. The process of filming, viewing and editing my rushes made it possible to reflect upon sensory presence in the music world, the ways in which musicians work with perceptual knowledge, and to appreciate the more affect-oriented aspects of music-making activities.

An example of this is when I viewed and reviewed my rushes of Daisy and Mily performing a piece of Irish music and felt moved. I was caught up in the music again and again. In playing this piece, Daisy (who played the principal melodic line) was able to convey a feeling of sweet calmness, which would sometimes bring tears to my eyes. In this piece, I recognised the stillness that was also evident in the meditation footage. In the performance, that stillness had been accessed by the musicians and especially could be seen in and felt through Daisy’s face, in her posture, balance and movement and in the strength of her playing. In contrast with other ways of relating, this showed stillness to be strongly centred in and through the body.

One of the contentions arising from my research with musicians is that it is through living a musical life that Daisy and other musicians constitute the self through which they are able to ‘just be’ in performance and thus perform at their best. In this, their lives can be seen as a continuous striving towards a kind of being that can be difficult to reach.

There are many things that can get in the way of ‘just being’ in performance. I was told often enough of how thinking could get in the way of doing. In performance, it is particularly important not to over-think, since thinking can so easily hinder playing. It is also important to not try to do too much—that is, to put too much effort into playing perfectly and brilliantly. It seems that both of these things can hinder fluidity and liveliness in performance.

At the beginning of my film, Being Daisy, Daisy tells us that ‘on stage the most important thing is to be nothing [other] than yourself’. She is in a cafe, relating to me how the experience and effect of a particular performance were transformed by thinking in different ways. When Daisy, Mily and John had played their concert on the Saturday prior to our conversation, she had made an experiment in which they had played the same piece twice, she had used the same techniques and played all the same notes—‘I was only thinking in different

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19 In my doctoral thesis: Moore, P. 2010, Living a musical life: musicians, music-making and the creation of space in Vienna, Thesis, Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester, Manchester.

20 Moore, P. 2009, Being Daisy, [50 mins], Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester, Manchester. Filming and editing audiovisual material were central parts of my doctoral research. Much of this work was directed into making the film Being Daisy, which forms an integral part of my doctoral thesis.
ways’, she said. The first time she had thought of herself as nothing special, not trying to do or be anything other than herself: ‘just doing my thing.’ The second time she had thought of herself as an incredible violinist, a performer who would make the music touch her audience through the power she would impart. During this conversation, Daisy asks me to guess which performance was better. Her answer is the first one, where she is ‘just doing her thing’ and not trying to be anything special. This is a major discovery for Daisy, which she makes and tests again and again.

The third sequence is one in which Daisy—again in the small space of her own apartment—works on some music she is writing and practising. In this scene, Daisy is improvising, composing and practising phrases as a way of working out and working through her composition. Her activities are always mediated by her relationship with her violin, even to the point where, when she

Figure 3 Still image from Composing and Practising Sequence

View Sequence Three: ‘Composing and Practising’

The third sequence is one in which Daisy—again in the small space of her own apartment—works on some music she is writing and practising.

In this scene, Daisy is improvising, composing and practising phrases as a way of working out and working through her composition. Her activities are always mediated by her relationship with her violin, even to the point where, when she

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leaves it carefully on a chair as she leaves the room, its presence clearly marks Daisy’s own absence from the practice space. The violin on the chair emphasises feelings of silence, absence and loneliness, simultaneously marking the violin as a familiar presence. The composing scene conveys a sense of concentrated activity—a concentration that Daisy uses to stay on task, despite interruptions through phone or fax.

Editing

The process of editing complemented the process of filming observationally. This was a way to explore time and relationships and to make connections. The process was both intuitive and serendipitous. In the edit suite, I constructed the scene of meditation around my own meditation with the camera. Something of my felt experience of this meditation comes through in the footage—marked by my own stillness while filming and the qualities of our shared breathing. During this meditation scene, both Daisy and I were accessing stillness. Moreover, this was a shared experience. This became more significant to me once I viewed this meditation in relation to other filmed moments. For example, I recognised this quality again in many of Daisy’s performances while viewing and reviewing my rushes.

Working with the camera and with the tools of editing gave an awareness of different rhythms, simultaneously present. There were rhythms on different scales: that of a whole practice session, as against the different tasks and segments within that session. There were audible rhythm and inaudible rhythm, internal and external rhythms, rhythm that aided concentration, rhythm that developed through working with others, and competing rhythms that could as easily disrupt as enable. Feeling rhythm was an indication of being in time, as well as a place from which to explore time as it is experienced and lived in music worlds. Through stillness, there was a sensual awareness of the rhythms of a place, to which a performer could be responsive. Making music in a concert situation was, for musicians, a lot about tuning in: feeling, capturing, making, matching and attaching rhythms within a particular location towards a shared experience.

Working with film constitutes a continuation of fieldwork because of the way that film renders being. Through editing one can undertake a kind of intensive, immersive ethnography that is different from reviewing field recordings and notes. Working this way, the material comes alive in a different way, because it involves a continuous re-immersion in the moments of filming, which is combined with the distance of time and the hyper-reality of multiple

22 That film can render being is something that is suggested through the writings of David MacDougall; see, for instance, *The Corporeal Image*, p. 5.
repetitions. In editing, although I compressed time, I aimed to achieve a fidelity to the overall experience of being with Daisy and other musicians. The edited sequence above resulted from my engagement with the rushes and attempt to reflect the sense of activity that I felt when watching Daisy work.

Playing with the rushes of Daisy’s composition and practice session enabled me to think through the activity of repetitive practice and find out more about this activity and its place in music making for musicians. In doing so, I used editing as my tool. I altered real time, cutting into the repetitive practising of the day and layering shots of these repetitions almost randomly together. I tried imposing rhythm (cutting every few seconds) and, additionally, cutting into a shot through feeling the internal rhythm of the playing, and placing a new, random shot at that spot. The result was often jarring, but interesting, because it highlighted how even in the repetitive nature of disjointed practice, there is a sense of rhythm. This rhythm is both disrupted and highlighted by my cutting. Sometimes when I repeated the same material again and again, however, I re-established a rhythm of my own.

In the sequence presented above, I intentionally spent time finding jump cuts that would work to show time passing, conveying in the language of film something of the length of time musicians spend at private practice, without losing a sense of the coherence of the practice session in felt terms. This highlighted several things about rhythm—most importantly the difference of working with rhythm imposed from without as opposed to felt from within. This process of working through ideas about practice and its importance in music making enabled me to highlight and grasp something that was otherwise difficult to articulate about the felt experience of being a musician. This was significant for my overall understanding about living as a professional musician in Vienna.

Part Two: Making Connections

In this section, I make some connections between the film sequences discussed in this article and other material from my fieldwork. I make these connections, montage-like, in order to build up a picture of the relationships between thoughts, feelings, actions and intentions around stillness: of being-in-the-moment; of being yourself; of not being negative, not being lethargic; of letting go of doubt; of being relaxed, as a kind of heightened awareness and of attending with and to the senses.
Introductory Sequence: Being yourself

In the conversation in the Introductory Sequence, Daisy talks about how she has to ‘be herself’ in order to give her strongest performance. In this section, I continue to explore what is meant by ‘being oneself’ in this context, explicitly connecting what I am referring to as ‘stillness’ to musicians’ talk of ‘being-in-the-moment’, ‘being there’ and ‘being oneself’. Such ways of referring to musical experience in the context of shared activities and discussions about music making were not uncommon amongst the musicians with whom I worked. As I see it, stillness—as a practised skill associated with a particular way of being-in-the-world—is referred to by such talk. Conversations like the one in this first sequence were one way musicians could recognise, learn and develop this stillness as a performance skill. Informal conversation thus contributes to musicians’ knowledge and understanding of how to be a professional musician.

Being-in-the-moment requires a particular kind of concentration—an attentiveness to the body in place, combined with a focus or direction gained in the action of playing itself. Stillness helps musicians to achieve extended concentration that is free from distraction, where, as Margaret puts it, ‘nothing is inhibiting that flow’. One aspect of remaining free from distraction in playing stems from the ability to overcome mistakes in a context in which musicians aim to play perfectly. It is important in performance not to let having made a mistake intrude into consciousness. In one of our filmed discussions, Daisy talks about the importance of ‘forgiving yourself’. I asked her whether the ability to forgive oneself makes for a good performer. She thought it must, because, without the ability to forgive yourself, you cannot manage to ‘be there’. For Daisy, these abilities—to ‘forgive oneself’ and to ‘be there’—are very important not only in performance, but also in the practice of a professional musician’s life.

Daisy: Once you’re there, you also feel, for example, ‘OK, I have to practise for this concert’, and you will. You’ll really practise for it and you’ll be able to feel what you need to do because you know where you want to be. So you know, ‘I want to play this great concert and I need to do this and this’, and you know this knowledge of what is needed to do. You see...I don’t know what it means to see yourself as who you are, because we are not something specific. But when you’re living there, I think you do see yourself for what you are. It’s just nothing you can [pin down] at all. You wouldn’t say ‘Oh, I’m particularly creative’ or... nothing like that. It’s just you’re being there and then you can feel, you can just feel the things that are needed for your goals or for anything you want in your life, and you do those things, you follow them.

Professional musicians in Vienna are commonly thought of as creative, artistic persons who are able to be masters of individual self-expression, but
the musicians I worked with were often sceptical about or even downright dismissive of this idea. Nevertheless, it was clear that many of the musicians came to and stayed in Vienna because they were in an environment that enabled music making of a high standard and through which they gained inspiration for their playing. During my fieldwork, it became clear that ‘being yourself’ was seen as an ability and attribute of the creative individual and as a concrete achievement of supportive groups of friends. In fact, perspectives on work and practice held an everyday importance for musicians that far outweighed more abstract and idealised considerations of creativity and talent. So, despite the fact that a strong association existed between understandings of Western classical music and ideas of individual talent, inspiration and genius, the professional musicians I worked with were focused on much more concrete aspects of music making in their daily lives. Musicians facilitated the making of vibrant spaces for music making through the level of support they offered each other by, for example, involving themselves in the performance occasions of others. This was one of a number of significant social activities that sustained the working friendships of musicians.

An excerpt from a conversation recorded during my fieldwork speaks to this supportive environment. It was through such working friendships that the creative individual existed.

   Yu: I mean, one thing I’ve noticed since coming to Vienna is how much of a positive effect—

   Margaret: —a positive environment can have.

   Yu: Yes. Absolutely! And [pause]...before I was quite allergic to praise, and now I can give it sincerely and I can receive it sincerely too. And it does wonders. It really, really, really does amazing things.

The Meditation Sequence

Throughout the filming, I took time with the camera, looking, listening and attending with the senses. I understood and used my body as integral to the filming, to the research, and, therefore, to my techniques of ethnographic and anthropological understanding. Filming observationally, whatever else it becomes, is initially a site-specific enterprise, an engagement that is synthesised in the moments when the camera is on. In holding my own camera, that is how I experienced it. Often, I detected traces of this sensibility on tape—for instance, the sensibility that enabled us as viewers to be with Daisy as she meditates.

Part of my aim in including this meditative sequence is to convey something of the experience of stillness through the communication of ‘experience by
Knowing Stillness

experience’. In the juxtaposition of Daisy’s meditation with a performance by Mily and Daisy’s group, Son Dos, stillness as ‘being-in-the-moment’ is palpable—something that can be seen, felt, recognised and connected to. My rushes of the meditation session also contained moments during which this kind of being was disrupted. For example, at one time, a participant in our meditation session stood up and moved around. The recording on tape shows the change when the sensory awareness and attentiveness of stillness were disrupted. For one, the hand-held camera work became unstable for a while because this change in attentive awareness prompted me to shift around a little. At that moment of disruption, Daisy also moved, becoming aware of her shoulder muscles—she put her right hand to the shoulder where she would normally rest her violin. For viewers of the footage, this prompts a change of perspective, and they become less a participant in the flow of the film material, just as Daisy had become more aware of her own self as meditating, and had then to re-engage the skill of being-in-the-moment to continue the meditation.

The Practising and Composing Sequence

During a different activity—that of composing and practising—Daisy’s overall focus and concentration were maintained over some hours. It was a concentration that was present on the scale of the work session as a whole. While at the fax machine or talking to me about composing, Daisy demonstrates one way in which she maintains that concentration, as she directs her attention back to the work of the session, thinking about the style and the mood of the piece and the way she can use the violin. Here, she attends to how she feels, and connects to the practice she is doing.

In this sequence, as in other parts of the material I have presented, I use the camera to attend to place, to interact with people in place and to notice things that I otherwise might not have noticed. For example, in this sequence there is a driven energy to the activity. This was a quality that was present in Daisy’s everyday life, bound up within her person, in and through her relationships. Editing gave me the ability to materially work with practising and composing. It thus gave me a way to understand how musicians wove the sensibilities of making through their lives. In the film sequence, the quiet times of notating are contrasted with the material thinking through of the improvisation and practice activities. The rhythm and discontinuity of this are emphasised through my playfully editing in the same manner as the imaginative crafting of the composing scene.

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In placing footage of a concert performance after the meditation sequence in the finished film, *Being Daisy*, I was able to create, at one and the same time, an intensiveness and extensiveness to the communicative activity of performing. This material can be connected to Daisy’s description of the relaxation that is important for a strong performance, in which you are ‘incredibly aware’. The playing posture, balance and poise of the musicians stem, I would suggest, from their skilled working with stillness. The bodily awareness of musicians is evident in the conversation at the beginning of this article. Yu’s ‘you’re in the negative’ hand movement indicates the bodily engagement in conversations and the materiality of ideas. As a practice, stillness can be associated with a kind of poise in the world that incorporates a proprioceptive awareness of the body in the environment.\(^\text{24}\) Once achieved, stillness is invigorating; however, stillness rarely seems to come easily. It is elusive and perhaps never quite grasped, thus requiring constant pursuit, a constant balancing in activity. Part of the skill of stillness is to maintain the right balance of concentration, relaxation and energy in changing circumstances.

Musicians’ skilled bodily awareness, specific to their own music making, allows them to bring parts of their body to awareness when required—often without conscious thought, but with a good deal of attention. Musicians are thus aware of their bodies in daily activity. This can be especially the case with the activity of playing, where feeling the body and playing an instrument are interlinked. In his discussion of playing his cello, Tim Ingold writes ‘to play is itself to feel’.\(^\text{25}\) He argues that feeling, rather than being an index of inner emotion, inheres in his gestures and includes such things as the pressure of the bow against the strings and the vibrato of his left hand.

While playing, musicians work to mutually constitute and transform being, body and space within the sensuous materiality of the environing world and in the contingencies of the activities of playing. Their skill in doing so lies in their ability to bring into use the right combination of perception, thought and action at exactly the right moment. In his discussions on skill, Tim Ingold

\(^{24}\) I suggest here that stillness can be related to the sense of proprioception. To explain this further, I cite Thomas Csordas, who writes that proprioception is ‘our sense of being in a body and oriented in space’. Csordas, T. J. 1994, ‘Introduction: the body as representation and being-in-the-world’, in T. J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodying and Experience: The existential ground of culture and self*, Cambridge Studies in Medical Anthropology No. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 1–26, at p. 5. I also cite Pedersen et al., who define proprioception as ‘the movement and position sense’ and consider it to be ‘synonymous with the ability to detect, without visual input, the spatial position and/or movement of limbs in relation to the rest of the body’. Pedersen, J., Lønn, J., Hellström, F., Djupsjöbacka, M. and Johansson, H. 1999, ‘Localized muscle fatigue decreases the acuity of the movement sense in the human shoulder’, *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, vol. 31, no. 7, pp. 1047–52, at p. 1047. Musicians use proprioceptive skill to respond through their playing and in the flow of activity to the specific and constantly changing circumstances of performance events.

Knowing Stillness writes that the skilled practitioner ‘is able continually to attune his movements to perturbations in the perceived environment without ever interrupting the flow of action’.26 This requires, simultaneously, an attention to the body and an experience of its absence (lest such an awareness interrupt the flow of playing).

Stillness takes discipline in order to maintain awareness in the flow of action and changing circumstance and, within that, to direct attention where needed and bring the appropriate skills into use at the right moment in rhythm and with timing. Although I associate stillness with ‘being-in-the-moment’, it cannot be characterised as a short-term, frivolous, hedonistic attitude of ‘thinking only about the now’. It is, rather, an extended temporality. Stillness is a practice that allows the incorporation of a lifetime’s worth of experience and skill into the improvisational circumstances of live performance. Musicians work hard to embody their musical skill through rehearsal and individual musical practice because embodied skills no longer demand continuous conscious attention.

In his book *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder discusses the paradoxical nature of bodily presence, suggesting that our experience of the body is that it is mostly absent to us. ‘It is often assumed’, he writes, ‘that this dualist [Cartesian] paradigm is shaped by ontological commitments at the expense of attending to lived experience’.27 He argues that a phenomenological account of bodily absence would suggest otherwise. In this, he challenges both our historical understandings of the body and our more recent critiques of these. Musicians, I would suggest, constitute a different case. In their practice and rehearsal, musicians attended explicitly and expertly to the body in order to pass their knowledge to the level of habit—where they no longer have to attend to bodily presence. In this sense, they are actively training the body to be absent through their attention to lived experience. Sigaut has something similar to say on this kind of technical expertise. He writes:

> The fading of knowledge in the process of assimilating it, or, better, literally embodying or incorporating it, is an essential feature of effective action and thus of technics...Learning is not complete until the transmitted patterns of action have become automatic...[this] has often been compared to a black box, which means not only that you can no longer see how it works, but also that you no longer need to know. An expert’s nervous system is an even more impenetrable black box.28

Their ability to incorporate knowledge in this way is an expertise that is central to musicians’ everyday practice. In order that their experiences of their bodies

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26 ibid., p. 415.
are absent to them, they need to be attentive to their bodies. In relation to Leder’s phenomenological account of bodily presence, this expertise suggests a significant way in which being a professional musician might constitute a very particular way of being-in-the-world and relating to others while playing.

Leder argues for a phenomenology of the body that uses the idea of from-to orientation to explain ways in which our body is not present to us in our everyday experiences of being-in-the-world.29 The body, according to Leder, only becomes present to us through experiences such as pain. While musicians experience this also, playing music requires musicians to skillfully presence the body in order to play and perform to the best of their ability. I would suggest that it is this skill of awareness and ‘presencing’ that allows them to make the minute and continual adjustments to ‘tune in’ to each other, to ‘be together’ in the music and respond flexibly to realise a musical performance.

The delicate balance that musicians have to achieve between perception, thought and action is highlighted by the following story: during rehearsal, one member of a string quartet kept messing up his particular part. He started off a section of the piece playing on the offbeat and was meant to maintain this rhythm in counterpoint to the others in the group, but somehow, he ended up playing on the beat. The other group members found this amusing and played a trick on him. They deliberately drew his attention to his playing during that part of the piece, knowing that if he thought about it and if he had to start consciously trying to keep his playing in time, he would inevitably ‘stuff up’. One of the others told me afterwards that they know ‘he can totally do it’ as long as he does not have to think about it. They were not at all worried that he would not ‘get it’ when he was in performance.

The coming together in skilled practice of thinking, doing and feeling presents a challenge to Leder’s formulation of bodily presence. This is because, in the flow of skilled music making, the musicians aimed to simultaneously hold their bodies both present, through a kind of loose attention that became focused when needed, and absent, through a belief and trust that they would be able to ‘just do it’. For one of my friends, Tristan, this was an ideal, although not a necessity, for music making. He told me that he was always striving towards ‘being in the body’ while playing, because you can be ‘a stronger player that way’. The first thing one must do to be in the body, in his account, is to ‘be aware’. I told him of my interest in the juncture at which skilled musicians are able to bring things to consciousness within the flow of playing at those moments when they most need them. Tristan agreed that this is a skill that musicians have to learn. I suggest this skill is based upon a perceptual knowledge, which becomes so embedded in bodily praxis as to constitute an intuitive skill—one that cannot

29 Leder, *The Absent Body*. 
be wholly articulated in words, whether spoken or thought. This skill is one that works best, according to Daisy, Tristan and others, when you are relaxed and happy with yourself as a musician.

To ‘be there’ one has to have confidence and let go of doubt, while still holding an openness to possibility. The confidence referred to is, for musicians, about knowing you can do it—that is, knowing you can play and perform the selected material. If stillness is thought of as a crafting of the moment, the confidence involved is an implicit understanding that one has the ability to craft in performance. One of the ways in which musicians gain this confidence is through practising with their instrument. During practice time musicians do exercises that improve their agility, they repeat certain passages over and over in order to understand and learn those passages and thus improve their performance.

‘Practice’, Yu says, ‘is only to get rid of this fear’.

Daisy agrees: ‘It is about getting rid of the fear and it’s about getting to know the pieces, actually.’

Yu: Well…yes. But after a while it’s about getting you to the stage where you have the confidence to go out and say ‘Look, I can do it’.

Daisy: And it’s funny…in a way I never think about confidence but actually it does seem to have something to do with it because I only think about only being there now—but of course being there now means you’ve let go of any doubt.

Yu: Of course.

Crafting the Moment

In this article I have drawn together diverse pieces of ethnographic material, filmic and written, in order to explore the concept of ‘stillness’ particularly in performance contexts. I have suggested that this stillness is a skilled practice and a tangible quality for musicians, which must be identified in some way, understood, practised and striven for in order to achieve the level of skill required for professional musical performance. I show the significance of stillness by juxtaposing, contrasting and connecting different material that arose from the process of filming. In the process, I identify it as a skilled practice in which years of musical practice and experience, and the diversity of skills that this involves, are gathered together in the moments of playing. Stillness, then, is configured, not as an absence of activity, but rather as the ability to concentrate on a diverse history of activity, and tailor it to the task at hand. It is a skill of bringing things into the moment and settling into the moment where perception and attention are gathered for the task at hand.
Through stillness, there is a point of synthesis of different kinds of knowledge and know-how, ideas and feelings, passion and abstract thought. There are connections made between actions, perceptions, thoughts and intentions that only emerge with stillness, facilitating lively and communicative performance. I also suggest that stillness has a broader significance in the lives of the professional musicians I worked with, since practising stillness constitutes a particular way of being-in-the-world that is part of their everyday experience.

I have aimed to show what is meant by stillness by using film as part of my anthropological research. I juxtaposed and connected different film sequences with other ethnographic material to allow the reader-viewer to experience something of stillness. Using audiovisual material in combination with text gives reader-viewers a way to know stillness, helping to make sense of musicians’ conversations that include serious consideration of such things as ‘being yourself’ and ‘being-in-the-moment’. In the context of living as a professional musician, stillness can be seen as not only a performance technique, but also a significant life skill.