Preface: Perspectives on Ethnographic Film

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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.