

Anna Grimshaw
& Nikos Papastergiadis

CONVERSATIONS WITH
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
FILM-MAKERS:

DAVID MACDOUGALL



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University of Manchester

CONVERSATIONS WITH ANTHROPOLOGICAL FILM-MAKERS: DAVID MACDOUGALL was first published by the PRICKLY PEAR PRESS, 6 Clare Street, Cambridge CB4 3BY, United Kingdom, in 1995.

The Editors are grateful to the Managers of Cambridge University's Smuts Memorial Fund for their generous support.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

CONVERSATIONS WITH ANTHROPOLOGICAL FILM-MAKERS: DAVID MACDOUGALL

ISSN 1351-7961

Printed in Great Britain by
Rank Xerox, 42 Sidney Street,
Cambridge, CB2 3HX, U.K.

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Preface

This is the second in our series of conversations with anthropological film-makers. We believe that anthropology must become more experimental and escape from the straitjacket of a text-driven academic culture. One way of doing this is to take films and cinema more seriously. David MacDougall and his wife, Judith, offer an important example, addressing problems of anthropological method and substance through the medium of film-making. Although David MacDougall has written at length about their project (see the *Guide to further reading* below p. 56), this is a rare example of an extensive interview. What follows is about three-quarters of the discussion he had with Anna Grimshaw and Nikos Papastergiadis in late 1994, only lightly edited to make for easier reading.

All the last four pamphlets in this series have been based originally on speech. There are several reasons for this. One is the need to humanise the literary tradition by restoring the qualities of oral performance, much as Walter Scott brought the talk of people (or everyday speech) into the historical novel. Another is the desire for spontaneity and improvisation as an alternative to the control of "writerly" texts. The result is a variety of hybrids, between the oral and the written, which reflect in style and content the aims of Prickly Pear Press, to reach a wider audience for anthropology than the one usually addressed by professional academics.

One obvious development of this strategy would be to produce pamphlets with their origins in the peculiarly hybrid discourse of e-mail (part letter, part telephone conversation). But fans of good writing should not despair; we have not abandoned the essay form.

The Editors

Introduction

David and Judith MacDougall have been leading figures in the project of anthropological film-making for over two decades. They began working in the late 1960s, in the aftermath of the great creative explosion in postwar cinema which was inaugurated by the Italian Neo-realist school. The impulse behind the innovations (formal and technological, as well as substantive) of British Free Cinema, the French New Wave and the American Direct Cinema movement was a commitment to an expansive democratic project. The new film-makers broke decisively with the old categories of fiction and documentary and with the established hierarchy of professional practice.

The MacDougalls have made their own distinctive contribution to this project of postwar cinema by using the new methods and ideas in areas of traditional anthropological enquiry. The problems they encountered here have driven their experiments with method, as the context for their work shifted from East Africa to Australia and ultimately to Eurasia. (See the list of their films appended to this Introduction below.)

David and Judith MacDougall have not been trained as anthropologists, yet their films belong more securely within the ethnographic tradition of the Malinowski school than many made by academic professionals. For they share the concerns which animate the literary texts of that tradition. Moreover, in seeking to find new ways of transmitting anthropological knowledge, the MacDougalls have exposed to critical view some of the most intransigent questions facing the modern discipline in its core methodology.

Specifically, they have probed the ambiguities and metaphysical assumptions which underpin the central Malinowskian notion of participant-observation, a curious hybrid of subjectivity and objectivism which always sat uneasily with the claim made by

ethnographers for scientific authority. They have done so by confronting the issue of anthropology's place in the modern world, inserting their practice into the arena of contemporary politics where protection from public scrutiny is hard to find. Their departure from conventional ethnographic strategies hinges on a critical consciousness of the power relations defining their encounters. This has led them to bring the camera and the film-maker closer to the subjects of their films and, at another level, to attempt to eliminate the authorial voice-over in favour of foregrounding the spoken words of the people themselves.

From the beginning the MacDougalls have had a clear sense of their intellectual agenda. They are unusual, certainly when compared with most academic anthropologists, in making this project explicit, charting each stage of its development as a response to the limitations of their previous practice. The writings of David MacDougall (see the *Guide to further reading*, below p. 56) have been the principal means of documenting this journey towards ever greater intellectual self-consciousness. But the exchange reproduced here explores a much broader reflexive space. It is a striking example of conversation, a process of opening up and reflection which has emerged as a key element in their approach to the complexity of modern society.

David MacDougall has written about a "...film-maker's ability to make a film more than merely a report on a cultural encounter and, instead, to embody it...This kind of film can only exist when they regard their work as more than the transmission of prior knowledge. They need to approach filming instead as creating the circumstances in which new knowledge can take us by surprise." ("Whose story is it?", 1991)

The act of speaking to others can be a process of discovery and recognition which goes beyond the mere telling of what is already known. Such was our experience when David

MacDougall agreed to be interviewed by us while he was visiting the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester as a Simon Professor in November 1994. The resulting conversation has been edited in a minimal way to preserve what we feel was the distinctive quality of the occasion itself.

We are grateful to Angela McLachlan for her work in transcribing the tapes of the interview, without which our conversation would never have been made readable.

Anna Grimshaw

Nikos Papastergiadis

Interview with

About the authors

Anna Grimshaw is a founding partner of Prickly Pear Press and a lecturer in the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester. She has edited four volumes of the work of C.L.R. James.

Nikos Papastergiadis lectures in sociology at the University of Manchester. He is the author of *Migration as Exile* (Manchester University Press, 1993), a book based on the work of John Berger.

The Films of David and Judith MacDougall

Films directed by DM and JM together unless stated otherwise.

The African Films

- 1968/89 *Imbalu: Ritual of Manhood of the Gisu of Uganda.*
Richard Hawkins, director; Suzette Heald,
anthropologist; DM, cinematographer. 75 mins.
- 1968/70 *Nawi.* DM, director. 20 mins.
- 1968/72 *To Live With Herds.* DM, director. 70 mins.
- 1968/74 *Under the Men's Tree.* DM, director. 15 mins.
- 1972/74 *Kenya Boran.* DM and James Blue, co-directors; Paul
Baxter, anthropologist. 66 mins.
- 1974/77 *The Wedding Camels.* 108 mins.
- 1974/79 *Lorang's Way.* 70 mins.
- 1974/81 *A Wife Among Wives.* 75 mins.

The Australian Aboriginal Films

- 1975/77 *Good-bye Old Man.* DM, director. 70 mins.
- 1977/78 *To Get That Country.* DM, director. 70 mins.
- 1977/80 *Familiar Places.* DM, director. 53 mins.
- 1977/80 *The House-Opening.* JM, director; DM, cinemato-
grapher. 45 mins.
- 1978/80 *Takeover.* 90 mins.
- 1978/82 *Three Horsemen.* 54 mins.
- 1982/84 *Stockman's Strategy.* 54 mins.
- 1982/84 *Collum Calling Canberra.* 58 mins.
- 1982/86 *Sunny and the Dark Horse.* 85 mins.
- 1982/86 *A Transfer of Power.* 22 mins.
- 1986/87 *Link-Up Diary.* DM, director. 86 mins.

Other Films

- 1967/72 *Indians and Chiefs.* JM, director, DM cinemato-
grapher. 40 mins.
- 1988/91 *Photo Wallahs.* 60 mins.
- 1992/93 *Tempus de Baristas.* DM, director. 100 mins.

Interview with David MacDougall

**Anna Grimshaw and Nikos Papastergiadis in conversation
with David MacDougall**

26th November, 1994 in Manchester

AG: Perhaps you could start us off at the beginning...

DM: I was born in New Hampshire. Then my parents moved to New York when I was about four, and so I grew up in New York. When I was thirteen I went to school in Vermont and then to Harvard for my undergraduate degree, which was in literature. I then decided that I wanted to make films and got a job with a film company in New York. They made industrial and educational films and I was hired as a researcher. My first job was to research a possible film on the White House, so I spent days in the New York Public Library going through old photographs. The idea was that Jackie Kennedy would do a tour of the White House, based on this research. They never made that film. I became involved in a series they were making on demography, and there was also a series of films on the philosophy of science and new frontiers in science. That was all right for me, but it wasn't really what I was interested in. Furthermore, I wasn't allowed to lay my hands on equipment of any kind. Everything was compartmentalised. Since I'd come in as a researcher and moved my way toward becoming an assistant producer and writer, I was not allowed in the editing room, I was not allowed to pick up a camera. I felt that I was cut off from a lot of the things that I wanted to learn about film-making. At the same time I took a night course in film at Columbia University, where I had a chance to use a camera and to do some editing. After about two years I left the company. It was called United States Productions.

I was about to be drafted into the army, and it was just at this time that the Peace Corps had been set up. So I applied to the Peace Corps and went to Malawi for two years and taught English in a teacher-training college. At some point during that time, I became very interested in prehistory. I'd done some anthropology at Harvard, both prehistory and social anthropology. Then, while I was in Malawi, I became interested in the prehistory of Central Africa and I thought that I'd like to study under Desmond Clark, who had just gone to teach at Berkeley. So I applied to Berkeley's Anthropology Department, and at the same time I applied to the UCLA Film School. They both accepted me and I had to decide. I gave it some thought. I had quite an important letter from my mother about then. She said: "How do you really want to spend your life? In academic institutions? What subjects do you want to devote yourself to?" And I finally decided that I would rather deal with live people than dead people. So I went to UCLA.

AG: You hadn't been exposed to anthropology as a sort of living study of society when you were at Harvard?

DM: I had studied introductory anthropology and I'd read some of the standard ethnographies—Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski and some others. So I had a sense of what fieldwork would be like. I'd also spent two summers working in the Canadian Arctic when I was a student—first when I was seventeen, and then the following summer when I was eighteen. I worked on the Ungava peninsula. The second summer I got stranded at an Inuit community in Payne Bay. My job was to organise supplies for some surveying camps that were dotted over quite a large area. I flew into Payne Bay expecting to leave in a couple of days. Then there was at least a month of windy weather, so the planes couldn't land in the bay—the sea was too rough. I just spent every day up in the tents with the Inuit families,

with no real purpose in mind, except that I found them interesting and I liked them. They were the only people around, except for a guy named Sammy Nanuk—that was his nickname—who was a huge French Canadian. He must have been between six and seven feet tall and he lived at the supplies dump as a kind of caretaker. He was uneducated—I don't think he could read or write—but he enjoyed living there. I liked him very much. He was a great friendly figure.

Even earlier, I'd been in Africa. When I was fourteen I went to Angola for about six months with my parents. My father was conducting a major survey of river systems in northern Angola as part of a development project. When I was in Angola, they put me to work, or I put myself to work, processing the photographs for the project and printing them. By that time I knew something about lab work, darkroom work. I spent a lot of time doing the photographs for the project, not actually taking many of them, but processing them and printing them. I was beginning to do my own still photography, and I even processed colour film, AnscoColor film. It took about two hours and seventeen steps for each roll, I think. You ended up with transparencies. I suppose that acquaintance with Africa, and that whole experience, were very important to me and made me want to go back to Africa someday, which eventually I did.

NP: Can you talk a little bit more about your time as an undergraduate and your study of literature?

DM: It was a very conventional English literature department at Harvard, although it combined a lot of American literature as well. There were some quite important figures in American literary criticism there at the time, like Kenneth Lynn, and also Richard Poirier—although he was more

involved with European literature, with Beckett and Proust and Joyce. There was a strong Shakespearean tradition. One of my impressions of the English Department was that there were a lot of pretty wild characters who drank too much and would come tottering into lectures and read from old notes. My focus was on the 18th and 19th century novel. I remember reading massive stacks of British novels, particularly in the last year when I would just lie in my room and stack up the seven volumes of *Clarissa* or *Pamela*, or whatever it might be, and work my way through them.

AG: Why did you choose 19th century novels?

DM: That was my interest. I enjoyed reading novels. I wrote my thesis on George Moore, who was one of those figures who had been very famous in his own day and then was completely neglected. But I found the whole intellectual atmosphere and environment of English literary studies very oppressive because, for one thing, it seemed to recognise nothing after about 1920 as worth paying attention to. I was certainly determined by the end that I was not going to continue in literature and I was not going to be an academic either. I just couldn't envisage a full-time career in a university.

NP: Nevertheless it seems that the quality of literature, rather than the institution of the academy, had a rather deep effect on you.

DM: Yes, both the literature itself and certainly the critical thought that accompanied it impressed me. It was at Harvard that I learned how to write, or I felt I learned how to write. What I enjoyed about writing was taking some idea and trying to address it in a new way, to say something that had never been said before—the feeling that

I was actually adding something, rather than simply reproducing what was already known or being talked about.

NP: So you saw the exercise of an essay not just as a synthesis of the known, but as an extension of what **you** know. This is closer to the genuine meaning of the essay, to try something out and push beyond. Is this an early seed of your practice as a film-maker?

DM: Maybe. I think I was provoked by the conservatism of the teaching, or much of the teaching, to be a bit provocative myself, and the only way to make it enjoyable to myself was to go off on some sort of more oblique path, for my own entertainment. I enjoyed taking examinations, because you could do the same thing in an examination. You could do something that might take the reader by surprise, after wading through a stack of a hundred blue books. So I think there was a sense of the audience, a sense of addressing somebody and trying to shake things up a little.

NP: What's your relationship to literature now, do you still read those 19th century novels?

DM: No, I don't read a lot of fiction. The fiction that I do read is certainly 20th century fiction. I'm not a very fast reader, and I usually don't get great tracts of time for reading.

AG: Do you feel those 19th century novels influenced your cinematic eye? From what you say I can now see an approach to film-making which could be said to be compatible with that kind of literary sensibility, with strong characters, stories etc.

DM: Well, I've never actually made that connection myself, although I think perhaps I could make a connection

between the multiple perspectives you get in 19th century novels and certain modes of film-making. I am interested in questions of who is speaking and who is being addressed, or who is speaking for whom, and in what way. I think you can draw a lot of parallels between first-person, second-person, third-person address and certain modes of film-making. I have been trying to write something about that recently.

NP: What about the representation of character? Is there some affinity in the way you explore certain characters in your films and evoke a sense of tragedy or pathos?

DM: I think a much more direct stimulus was the combination in the 1960s of the new forms of documentary that were starting to be made, and exposure to certain kinds of fiction film-making, particularly the Italian Neorealists—and then just a bit later the New Wave directors, who were playing games with fiction and documentary. There's a kind of paradox in the models that we were following, because on the one hand we were rejecting a lot of the language and grammar of fiction film-making, the classical ways of shooting and editing, but at the same time, fiction was providing another model. We were very much interested in what was being done in documentary, in terms of filming style and editing styles, but we were also very much interested in the narrative possibilities of fiction. It seemed like an opportunity to try to make documentary films that had the emotional depth and reflectiveness of fiction.

NP: When you say "we", who is "we"?

DM: I think I'm speaking of a whole generation of film students, but more precisely of Judith and myself. Because we met at UCLA. I think we were very lucky to arrive at the film

school just at the time when all these amazing new films were being produced in documentary.

AG: What year did you arrive?

DM: I arrived in 1966, but I'd already begun to see some of the new work that was coming out in about 1961-62, when I was working in New York. I remember seeing **Primary** for the first time then. It was the sort of film that was being pedalled around, you know, passed from one film-maker to another. I remember being rung up and being told, "We're going to look at this new film of Leacock's. Would you like to come and see it?" And I remember going to a friend's house and meeting somebody from the National Film Board of Canada, who had under his arm a copy of **Lonely Boy** and **La Lutte (Wrestling)** (the English title) and seeing those films. That would have been in 1962.

NP: Sounds like a dealing in a contraband scene (*laughter*). Was it a very informal network of people, creating a small community for themselves?

DM: I think there was a network—Leacock, Pennebaker and so on—but at that time I was certainly only on the very margins of it.

AG: Out of the film-makers who influenced you, there's one who turns up regularly in your writing and that's Basil Wright. Most people, if you ask them who their film-making ancestors were, if they're working in an anthropological tradition, always say Flaherty or Rouch. I've never actually seen Wright referred to a great deal. I wonder if you can say when you came across Wright's work and why he has remained a figure whom in certain circumstances you come back to?

DM: Well, **Song of Ceylon** is the only film of his that I really know, and he said himself that it's the only film he made that he really cared about. I don't remember when I first saw it. I may have seen it at school, at primary school, in New York. Certainly one of my earliest memories of films was of seeing **Nanook** at school, when I was perhaps eight or nine. Then, I'm certain that I saw **Song of Ceylon** again at Harvard. I suppose that film is so memorable because it's so complex, because it uses all the devices of Soviet cinema, but in quite a different way. I'm referring not only to the editing style, but also to the use of divisions—chapters and titles. On top of that, you have the text of [Robert] Knox, which is a "found" text that makes a rather interesting and uneasy tension with the images. It's also a very passionate film, and that's probably what in the end affected me most about it. You can get from the film something of the transmission of his own emotional experience while making it. But that's much more difficult to put your finger on. Where does it come from exactly? Some people have said that the film is full of marvellous compositions in the frame, and Basil Wright just says "Well, my viewfinder was off" (*laughter*). But I think it stands out as the only film of its kind in that whole period. I can't think of another that comes anywhere near it in its combination of personal investment and intellect.

NP: Do you think that's a combination which you strive to create as well?

DM: I would hope so. Yes, I believe in leaving a lot of space for oneself in a film (or for that matter in writing), in order to discover something through the process itself that you perhaps had no idea was there at the beginning. And that may be something about yourself or something about the subject. I don't know whether that has something to do with the relationship between emotion and intellect, but

possibly it does, because each one informs the other and tells the other to leave space.

NP: Are there other film-makers, perhaps not working within anthropology, that have a similar appeal to you?

DM: Well, certainly there are a lot of fiction film directors whom I have a special feeling towards: certainly Ozu, Bresson, Woody Allen and then, closer to documentary, certainly Rouch.

AG: Had you seen Rouch's work when you were at UCLA?

DM: I didn't see Rouch's films until about 1968, when there was an important ethnographic film conference at UCLA, which I think influenced a lot of us. Rouch showed *Jaguar* there, and that for me was extraordinary. I can't remember if he showed other films at the same time or not, but John Marshall showed some of his Pittsburgh police films. I'd already seen *The Hunters*, and certainly some of the other African films that Marshall had made. I was part of an interdisciplinary programme in ethnographic film at UCLA. It was set up by Colin Young in the Film School and Walter Goldschmidt, who was then chairman of the Anthropology Department. The idea was to create a one-year programme within the MA to bring anthropologists and film-makers together. As part of that course we were shown a lot of so-called ethnographic films. But I think Colin Young was also interested in it as a special form of documentary. I remember seeing *Dead Birds* quite early on. I remember writing a letter to Robert Gardner, asking if he had any suggestions for aspiring young film-makers. I don't recall if he answered (*laughter*). I wrote to Tim Asch, because I knew he was working with John Marshall, but at that time Tim was in Venezuela. I got back a very nice

letter from Patsy Asch, saying that there really wasn't any work for me at Harvard.

After completing the ethnographic film programme, Judith and I were both recruited to go on a university project to Africa. It was a film directed by Richard Hawkins, who was one of our teachers. There were three of us — Judith, me and Jack Reed, who was to be the sound recordist. We went to Uganda and made a film on initiation in Bugisu, working with an anthropologist named Suzette Heald. I shot most of that film, although Judith shot some towards the end as well, when we used two cameras. Richard was the director of the film, and we as the crew were quite determined to be very professional—we would allow the director to make the decisions and we would simply do our work. But in fact it was the sort of film where the decisions had to be made continuously during the filming itself. We were following two initiates in the month or two before their circumcision. During that time they had to make visits all over the surrounding countryside to various relatives and perform small rituals at each homestead. They had to get the permission of a large number of relatives, and they had to be indoctrinated by their relatives about the importance of initiation, and be told how to behave. They were put through a quite frightful psychological ordeal in advance of the initiation. They were not only frightened of the circumcision, which was a painful and radical form of circumcision, but also of the danger of failing and breaking down, or showing pain, and shaming their families. We focused primarily on one boy, Matakai, who was about seventeen, and to a lesser extent on his friend, Nasani, who was reluctant to go through with the whole thing and was being given very little support by his family. It was the kind of film in which, for me at least, it was very important to try to register Matakai's feelings—his emotional and psychological state—through the filming. It wasn't the sort

of film where you would learn much by talking to him about it. You had to watch carefully, and you had to follow him. You had to give the audience a sense of what the experience was like for him.

AG: So did you find that observational or direct cinema—the idea of watching very carefully for clues and avoiding asking someone to say what they feel about a situation—enabled you to capture what was happening?

DM: Well, that was the current ethos of direct cinema in America. There was little intervention with your subject, although interviews did become important later on. The primary concept was to observe, to be unobtrusive and try to make sense of the events through their own narrative structures. The other important thing with this film was that it was intended to be subtitled, so we were always shooting with the knowledge that what was said would be subtitled. And of course the equipment was synchronous sound equipment. I think we were very lucky as students to be the first generation to have access to synchronous sound equipment. We had Eclair NPR cameras and Nagra III tape recorders, which weren't yet widely available. There wasn't video equipment then. So we started right in with 16mm synchronous sound.

AG: What was it about the sort of ethnographic films that you saw while you were at UCLA that led you to think of working in Africa rather than making more conventional documentaries at home?

DM: The ethnographic films we had seen were inspiring and provocative. They gave a sense of opening up new territory, new ways of registering different kinds of human experience. They contrasted with other sorts of films that were annoying and felt terribly restrictive—that created

images of people that seemed incomplete or false or insensitive. There was a strong impulse to do something better than what we'd seen before, except for those few exceptional films.

AG: Such as Rouch and Flaherty?

DM: Yes. In America there was a very strong tradition of the didactic film, the "educational film", characterised by a very strong voice-over commentary. A lot of the impetus came from a wish to go against the grain of that sort of film-making altogether.

NP: How were these decisions connected to your desire to be a film-maker while at Harvard?

DM: While I was at Harvard I was trying to write fiction. I think, in retrospect, that the teaching of fiction in so-called creative writing classes has it all wrong, because there's a constant emphasis on plumbing your own personal experiences as source material for your writing. That will happen anyway with a good writer, but initially it's a lot to ask beginning writers to do. I think it is much more productive to encourage their ability to get into other people's boots, and to have a sense of actually writing something that is not simply personal reportage. It's not a transformation of personal experience, but something completely new, an artefact in its own right that stands outside the writer. I think that's very much undervalued as an approach to teaching writing, and I was a bit discouraged from writing by the other approach. I wish I'd been encouraged to write things that were marvellous creations outside myself. That would have forced me to draw on my knowledge and experience, but would have allowed me to objectify it—to see it as a construction. There was always a fuzzy distinction between one's own

experience and one's writing that I think was very confusing for students. There were obviously some students who had no problem with that, but certainly for me film provided a way of getting out of that dilemma, precisely because one was putting together a construction of something observed, of something outside oneself, and this eventually allowed one's interest, one's own passions, one's own analysis to come through.

AG: Were you aware that there was something very new happening in cinema, in comparison to literature, which you say was very static?

DM: Yes, yes, exactly. I mean there were extraordinary things on the screen that were wonderful, and it seemed as if anything was possible at that time in cinema. For one thing, the kinds of films I was seeing were quite a mixed bag. There were a lot of European films from different countries, and these gave a taste of different places, different cultures and different atmospheres that was very seductive. I was particularly impressed by the use of real time in Godard—for example, in *Vivre sa vie*, the discussion with the philosopher Brice Parain in the café. And of course the fact that you could incorporate such a scene in a fiction film—something that was both fiction and not, that was part of this man's own life—the fact that it could be framed in this way was very exciting.

NP: So part of the excitement was this crossover of genre?

DM: And also I suppose the perversity of a lot of it too (*laughter*). The fact that Godard will shoot a whole sequence of the back of someone's head, at a bar. This sense of breaking the rules and yet having that scene extraordinarily vivid because there's still so much to look at, the sense of addressing the intelligence of the viewer as

well as the emotions—and, of course, drawing attention to the difference between what we expect to find in a film and what he suddenly gives us.

AG: Do you think film is uniquely able to do that, in a way that writing isn't?

DM: Well, just in ontological terms, I suppose so. One could say a lot about the difference between the content of a film image and a written description. But on the other hand these elements of surprise, or playing with convention, or dealing with the periphery of experience—these are all things that can be done in writing as well. There's a lot to be explored about the ways in which we read images as against the way in which we decode writing, or form images out of writing. Gilbert Lewis has written a little about this. I think it has partly to do with the simultaneity of stimuli within images and the limited freedom that we have to explore images in idiosyncratic ways, the relationship between figure and ground and how those can be reversed, even the problems of creating figures as distinct from ground in film-making.

NP: Do you think some of these formal innovations, and the perversity of some of these formal techniques, also connected in some ways to the politics of the time? Speaking from my own experience, for instance, I watched Godard in the early 80s as a young undergraduate, which I imagine was a very different experience from watching it in the 60s, because I was getting a history lesson and a film, rather than a political lesson, as well as a technical lesson.

DM: Yes, I certainly think those things are linked. I think that for me there was a political component both in altering conventional forms of expression and in what that allowed

you to change in people's understanding of the world. Broadly speaking, you couldn't dissociate politics from questions of form. Therefore one could have a real argument over the ethics of a cutaway in documentary—those were the kinds of discussions that were going on in the 60s in the politics of representation—and they were serious issues for us. I think perhaps it was only a bit later that it became more clearly joined to questions about the mass media. But perhaps I was just late in coming to that, to looking at the role and conventions of television, say, during the Vietnam war.

NP: Were there any American film-makers who served as intermediary figures capable of bridging these different levels of politics and art?

DM: I think the major figures weren't really engaged politically in that way. Leacock wasn't. The French-Canadians weren't really. Pennebaker and Leacock made some films about political matters, but they had to do with capital punishment, with Kennedy in the White House, with the civil rights movement—and in some way that was all part of an earlier, more genteel civil libertarian outlook on life. It hadn't been radicalised in the way that it was to be just a little later.

AG: You mean by people like Wiseman?

DM: Yes, I was coming to Wiseman. He was perhaps the first who, in a rather oblique way, was changing the perspective on the uses of documentary. Wiseman's programme was an exploration of our own society, not through stories of individuals, but through an examination of a series of different institutions. Also I think formally Wiseman worked very differently. The form of all his films has been one of theme and variations, where he doesn't necessarily

follow the same people from beginning to end. He moves from one group to another, and each time there's a reiteration of certain observations and themes. I think it's only when you get to the more explicitly political films of the late 60s and early 70s, let's say to Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig*, and to films that began to use a lot of interview material, that there was a radical break with the observational school and the kind of political thinking that was part of it.

AG: The effect of the feminist movement presumably was part of these changes. The idea of women telling their stories for themselves and the civil rights movement...

NP: ...which connects with your movement from observational film and into this mode of participatory film-making...

AG: Yes, that might be a way of getting back to the East African films.

DM: Well, I'll just sketch in the background of that. After we finished shooting *Imbalu*, the film directed by Richard Hawkins with Suzette Heald, he and the sound recordist Jack Reed went back to America, but they very kindly left the filming equipment with Judy and me. We had return air tickets to America which we sold, and with the money from that we bought an old clapped-out Land Rover. Meanwhile, we'd been making contacts with people at Makerere University in Kampala, in particular with Peter Rigby, an anthropologist who had been studying the Gogo of Tanzania. The University agreed to give us institutional support, or at least moral support, if we wanted to go on and make another film. That was very much my wish, because I was at the point in my studies where I should have been making my thesis film. So, after the Bugisu project ended, Judith and I travelled up to Karimojong

District and were quite amazed by the contrast between the way of life of the pastoralists and the agrarian people in southern Uganda.

In many ways, the life of the Gisu had a suffocating quality: it was a settled agrarian society with a lot of internal tension. One was always surrounded by hills and foliage. It was on the side of Mount Elgon in southeastern Uganda, and I suppose the experience of having observed the psychological pain that the initiates were going through also felt oppressive to us. Whereas the pastoralists seemed to have quite a different style of life, a different style of expressing themselves to one another. The landscape was quite different—flat and open, with a few hills. People dressed differently, or didn't dress much at all. One had a sense of space and openness. In time, of course, you began to understand the sorts of internal pressures that exist there as well, but we found it to be a very attractive contrast to working amongst the Gisu, and we decided that it would be good to make a film in Karimoja.

Peter Rigby had written an essay called "Pastoralism and Prejudice" concerning the predicament of pastoral societies in newly-emerging African nations. He was looking particularly at Tanzania, but since he was living and teaching in Uganda, he was also aware of what was happening there and in Kenya. In all these cases, you had a central government dominated by a bureaucracy drawn from settled agrarian people. For example, Obote in Uganda came from the North, but the policies of the government were, to a large extent, determined by the perspective of Southerners. You could read the same situation right across Africa, through to Nigeria and right round to Senegal. Initially I was interested in a kind of general ethnography of people in Karimoja, but the more

that I saw of the situation there, the more I realised that I'd have to make quite a different sort of film.

AG: What was your idea of a general ethnography?

DM: I think it was a rather ill-formed idea. I suppose it was conventional in the sense that it would be closer to a kind of ahistorical monograph, creating an image of the society as it existed independent of history, independent of external conditions, within the tradition of British functionalist anthropology, which was still very appealing to me. It was certainly appealing to try to create a portrait of a society in all its internal integrity and completeness. But as soon as one went to Karimoja, one saw that there were huge tensions between administrators and local people. There were all sorts of changes occurring in education, in government administration and the introduction of a cash economy, even in geographical terms, because pressure was being put upon people to grow crops in areas where it was very difficult to grow crops. Boreholes had been drilled to provide water, but those changed the way in which people moved their livestock, thereby creating a very unstable situation.

Meanwhile, Makerere University had agreed to act as the umbrella organisation for me to do this as my thesis film. Peter Rigby gave me wonderful personal support, the University provided some equipment, such as a tent and some camping gear. We had the UCLA equipment, we had the Land Rover, and through Peter Rigby we had met one of his Jie assistants, named Peter Lukiru. Peter took us to his home in central Karimoja District. The District was divided into three major areas—the Dodoth people in the North, the Jie in the Centre and the Karimojong in the South. Largely because of Peter Lukiru's availability and the introduction to his family, I decided to make the film in

Jie. We therefore had a film subject as well. In fact we had everything but film to put through the camera. A long time was spent sending telegrams back and forth to Richard Hawkins at UCLA, pleading for some small grant to buy film. Eventually, Richard found a bit of money which allowed us to buy about ten thousand feet of black and white film. We also had a little colour film left over from the Bugisu project. With that film stock we made **To Live With Herds** and two shorter films, **Under the Men's Tree** and **Nawi**.

NP: Would you like to connect your early experience of the politics of representation with your own film-making practice as it evolved through the making of **To Live With Herds**?

DM: The first audience for **To Live With Herds** would have been, notionally, the sorts of administrators who were working in areas where there were pastoralists, in whatever country. That would have been the ideal audience, because the film addressed itself to the predicament of the pastoralists. I don't know how many such people in fact ever saw the film, but it was intended as a message to them that there was another way of looking at pastoralists, a way that included part of their outlook.

NP: So you felt at the time a strong need to identify and represent this as carefully and as accurately as possible, that is, to construct the actual world view of those people, upon whom power was being exercised and who had, in a sense, very limited resources to resist that power. Is that the concern?

DM: Yes, I think so. But of course there were other concerns as well, more related to film generally and to the debates going on around ethnographic film. Those had to do with

the portrayal of people as individuals, as against portraying them simply as social actors or as types. In another sense the film was trying to break the rules of the didactic film. Although the film is didactic in using titles at the head of each "chapter", it went against the more unreflective conventions of the time by avoiding voice-over narration, except for a little personal comment, and also in trying to break the film up into segments, which had for me a modernist flavour. The decision to use chapters and text in the film came partly from memories of **Song of Ceylon** and silent films, but also from what Godard was doing in narrative films. I was conscious also that I was trying to import from "direct cinema" certain techniques that had not been used before in ethnographic film. I felt that I was making a new kind of film, that it would be something quite different.

AG: Did this also include the sense of inserting yourself very intimately into the situation and observing very closely?

DM: Well, it was partly that and partly the way of filming. That was already very much a component of direct cinema as it was practised by Leacock and Michel Brault. What was perhaps different were the more formal and analytical aspects of the film.

NP: In your writing there is a strong distinction between these two types of film-making. You say that in its worst form observational cinema reproduces a hierarchy, categories that are inherent to colonialism, which leads to the objectification of the other and the distancing of the self. On the other hand, you define a film-making practice which draws from Basil Wright and Godard that both mixes fiction with fact and makes direct criticisms against, say, imperialism in Vietnam. Were you conscious of these connections or was this part of the groundswell?

DM: I think a lot of it was unconscious. It was only later that I began to think about some of those things more explicitly. Rather, I think it was part of a certain cultural climate. What I was most aware of was a new representation of people within a quite different and unfamiliar society and the challenges to many of the conventions of documentary.

AG: It is interesting to note how much *To Live With Herds* draws from the model of observational cinema. Was your departure from this model related to an awareness that it really couldn't contain this complex situation, so that you then moved to develop a more participatory form in the later films?

DM: Yes, but I think it's important to remember that observational cinema itself at that time was in its own way radical, because it was making a break with the kind of synthetic observation that belonged to the classical approach to shooting and editing fiction films. We saw observational film-making very much as a reply to the Hollywood film, in that it placed the observer in the scene as a real person, as a person with a camera. The classical Hollywood style posits an omniscient and invisible observer, who can be anywhere within the scene. One of the conventions of making documentary films in America had been to shoot it like fiction, to shoot the establishing shot, to shoot the close-ups and the inserts, to change the camera angles constantly, in imitation of fiction. In shooting *To Live With Herds* we found—and this was a gradual discovery—that after beginning to shoot from several different camera angles in a scene, we couldn't use them. So we had to settle for one position, one perspective—the rest would have to be thrown away. Possibly the fact that we had very limited film stock helped (laughter), but I think it's important to underline the sense in which observational film was actually an attempt to

draw attention to the position and perspective of the observer—to put the viewer in a position approximating more closely the position of the film-maker. Then, of course, if you combine that style of observational filming with other devices which break up the narrative, and which create a very explicit kind of analysis, you're not trying to seduce the audience into the experience of an all-seeing, all-powerful, notional observer. You're actually trying to draw attention to the limitations of the observer, to the fragmentary nature of evidence, and to the precise perspective of the film-maker in each situation.

AG: Do you think though it was also continuing the idea of vision as being a privileged source of knowledge, with which anthropology is complicit?

DM: I suppose it's natural for a film-maker to privilege vision to some degree, but you also have to remember that, with synchronous sound, words were becoming increasingly important in documentary. With the coming of synchronous sound there was a movement away from the visual which ended up eventually in films being constructed almost entirely of conversations or interviews.

AG: I certainly see that as the basis for a synthesis of a Malinowskian-type of anthropology and observational cinema. I think they go well together because, for fieldworkers following Malinowski, the last line of defence was, "I saw it for myself".

DM: There's a close parallel between the notion of the anthropologist as hero, discovering a foreign culture and bringing it back home, and the film-maker doing the same thing and bringing back the evidence of it on film. Contrary to what a lot of people have assumed about British anthropology, the anthropologist is not effaced in

any way, but is actually put at the centre of things as a viewer.

AG: But, more precisely, do you think that observational cinema, with its privileging of a singular perspective, replicates the idea of genuine ethnographic authority?

DM: Yes, I think that's true, although it would be modified somewhat, because in writing an ethnography you're really the only conduit to the audience, whereas film to some degree allows one to look over the shoulder of the film-maker, albeit from the position that the film-maker chooses.

AG: I've always felt that that's the reason why anthropologists haven't used film: it's too dangerous. Margaret Mead, for instance, believes that the great thing about film is that other people can look at it and form their own interpretations. And most anthropologists would be appalled by that (*laughter*).

NP: Considering both the general status of film in anthropology and the new possibilities that came with synchronous sound, this suggests a certain shift in where the attention would then lie. It implies a move away from space and more towards time perhaps. With narration and interviewing, the emphasis of representation moves away from the visualisation of space, behaviour and practice, and towards the retelling or the accounting for of events, in some sort of narrative form...

DM: And in the past...

NP: But does the shift in technology, while drawing more attention towards the dialectic between time and space,

neutralise the spatial dimension as it draws attention more towards the representation of time?

DM: Synchronous sound does establish time/space as one entity...

NP: But does it privilege one over the other, that's the question?

DM: Yes, but I'm not sure about the privileging of time over space, because so much of what a film-maker does is to try to create space, to create a geography through the camera. Maybe that comes off to a viewer as being a given, but the whole process of film editing certainly makes it a recurrent problem in putting films together.

AG: Perhaps you are still working on the relationship between image and text in film?

DM: Text comes into film in all sorts of ways, to begin with in the title of the film, which sets up certain expectations. Then there are all sorts of uses of text quite apart from spoken dialogue, which come from using subtitles or voice-over, either originating from the subjects themselves or from the film-maker.

NP: I was simply wondering whether you and Anna thought the geography that the camera tries to create was being marginalised by synchronous sound?

DM: I would have said at the time that I made **To Live With Herds** that the earlier form of documentary, the pre-synchronous period, had privileged text, spoken text far above space, and that whatever space there was was often a jumble, a set of illustrations of the text, but it didn't in itself construct its own geography. So I would have read it the other way, that synchronous sound allowed one to deal

with space in new ways. It brought documentary back to being closer to fiction, in the way that fiction tries to put the viewer in a space. It gave a new "space" for space. Natural ambient sound is very important in documentary; and, although you can synthesise that, as the Italians do beautifully in their fiction films (because all the effects are dubbed in afterwards), it's nevertheless very important in giving depth to the visible space, and also in giving the sense of something off-screen, outside the frame. Now, however, I would say that documentary does indeed privilege the verbal dimension of social experience over the nonverbal through its emphasis on interviews.

AG: I'd be interested if you could say something about your working partnership with Judith.

DM: Judith and I met at the UCLA film school in California. She actually shot my first student film and I shot her thesis film. When I made *To Live With Herds*, my thesis film, I was nominally the director, but she actually played a crucial part in the film. That then developed into the kind of partnership we've had in many later films. In all these films I've been the cinematographer and she's been the sound recordist. That obviously has a huge influence on the way the films are shaped. However, we try to work as co-directors and co-editors. In every case when a cinematographer and a sound recordist are working together, there's a kind of marriage of responsibilities, and a necessity to work out a shorthand of how to work, and a process of operating as a team and anticipating what the other person's going to do. Along with the very many advantages of that kind of predictability and familiarity of working as a team, there are certain constraints. One of them is that in order to achieve consensus it's more difficult to make idiosyncratic decisions. I think that means that you tend not to do things impulsively, and perhaps

that's a strength of this kind of film-making, perhaps it's a weakness. During shooting, of course, decisions have to be made on the instant and a lot of that falls to the cinematographer, but in planning and constructing the film, and in the editing, you talk things out endlessly. But we feel it's also important for each of us to do separate work from time to time.

AG: Perhaps I can move into the Turkana trilogy, which raises questions of participatory cinema. In one film, *A Wife Among Wives*, you actually use your partnership to explore the different dimensions of the marriage situation in Turkana society. As far as I know, that's the only film where you explicitly draw on your complementarity as film-makers. Do you feel it worked as a device, as a way of exploring the meaning of marriage?

DM: In that film it only emerges because the film is structured through an enquiry rather than through following a set of chronological events or focusing on a particular person. *The Wedding Camels* is very much a narrative film which is led by events, and *Lorang's Way* centres around Lorang. In *A Wife Among Wives* we structured the material around the process of trying to find out about certain attitudes people had toward polygamy. Throughout the Turkana filming, and in other situations, the fact that we've presented ourselves as a couple, a married couple, has influenced the way in which people related to us and also the way they appear in the films. But I don't think there's a direct correspondence in *A Wife Among Wives* between the investigation of marriage and the fact that we were a married couple, that's more incidental. We also had our three-year-old child with us, which meant that we were visiting the Turkana as a family. I think that had some importance to them, first of all because we formed a recognisable kind of group and also because it suggested a

certain commitment on our part to staying and being participants in life on a domestic level.

AG: It's certainly the most reflexive film in that trilogy of films. It actually begins with the Turkana filming, and with David and Judith asking the Turkana what they would film if they were the film-makers. It is the film which really draws attention to the film-making process. Were you conscious at the time that you were breaking with observational cinema? Had you developed ideas about where you would like to go in terms of participation, or were you trying it out as it went along and seeing what seemed to work?

DM: In a way, I think we were breaking with it already in **To Live With Herds**, more perhaps through the overall form of the film than in shooting specific sequences. What ends up in **A Wife Among Wives** is really a very small part of what we'd intended. It's only emblematic perhaps. We had taken Super-8mm cameras with us and had got some of the young men involved in the filming to see what sorts of things they would find interesting. About half of that footage got lost somewhere between Kenya and the lab, so we were a bit discouraged about that. But actually, although they were somewhat interested, the young men had a much greater interest in their other affairs, with cattle and girlfriends. I see those passages at the beginning of **A Wife Among Wives** as more emblematic of our relationships with people and a kind of communion or commonality that we felt. I always think of **The Wedding Camels** as being more self-reflexive than **A Wife Among Wives**—perhaps because it was the major film of the three, the centrepiece, but also because it was the film in which we made the greatest effort to try to create a sense of indeterminacy about knowledge, about the situation that one finds oneself in in the field, trying to make sense of complex events, and not necessarily being able to do it.

The film is more than anything about the acquisition of knowledge, rather than about a wedding. It's about how one learns about any human situation, and therefore about the nature of enquiry.

I felt there was such a strong presumption in ethnographic film-making that there was a single ethnographic reality that could be recorded and brought home on film, that it was important to question that. It was important to suggest that ethnographic reality might exist, but it existed in the form of multiple perspectives and that for each person involved in it, there was a piece of the story, a piece of the whole. For somebody coming in from outside there are even greater problems of understanding. So the film plays upon information and misinformation, and divergent views of what happened. It puts that problem foremost, whereas **A Wife Among Wives** is driven by our enquiry, so we're more in control from the start. We're trying to explore certain abstract concepts of polygamy and how co-wives relate to each other, and we can more or less lead that process. In **The Wedding Camels** something was happening and it would go on without us. We had to do the best we could to make sense of it.

NP: It's interesting how that works though, isn't it, because one of the features of **The Wedding Camels** and also, interestingly enough, **Takeover** is that both of those films are about how something is going to happen. And it's a very clear event: either the wedding is going to happen or it isn't; either the takeover will happen or it won't. The partiality of knowledge, and picking up on rumour and gossip and innuendo, is a feature of both films, and one of the consequences of it is that it creates suspense, which is the opposite of scientific ethnographic film. To use Peter Loizos's phrase, your films have the quality of "sustained

ambiguity" and in this there is a critique of positivist uses of narrative.

DM: Yes, what's interesting in comparing this kind of narrative film-making to academic writing is that, at least in my experience, the dominant structure of the anthropological essay is an ABA structure. It starts by telling you what it's going to tell you. Then in part B, it develops the argument about those assertions and in the last section it recapitulates the first part so that you're completely robbed of suspense (*laughter*). You know everything that's going to happen before it happens, and there's no sense of discovery or unfolding, except to the extent that the development sustains the anticipation of the introduction. It's a very clever device for creating belief, because you suggest that something is true, and then you resolve any doubts by answering the argument, or solving the problem, and then you hammer it home.

It's a powerful instrument for creating belief, whereas the power of narrative, of course, is that it creates belief in another way, which is to lead you to suspect that you have made these discoveries for yourself. It's always interesting to compare both those processes to the processes of humour in which a joke may be foreshadowed and then paid off by a punch-line, or a Mack Sennett character may walk into a terrible situation and the audience knows exactly what's going to happen, and then it happens.

NP: But it all revolves, to me, around the question of judgement and the allowance of multiple levels of agreement and disagreement, as opposed to an absolute and inevitable conclusion. And the strength of communication, I feel, is paradoxically intensified by the degree to which you can hold back judgement. I was wondering whether this process of representation is also influenced by your

partnership with Judith. I suppose that when you work with somebody who's also the partner in your life, then you would become even more reflexive about the relationship between work and life.

DM: I think we've been fortunate in that we agree on a lot of things. There are many collaborations that are very difficult: one can see so many cases in which people are pulling against each other. Probably the most important thing we share is a belief that cinema should be a medium of suggestion and implication rather than of statement, or perhaps even of description. I'm sure that's true, because we come out of a common background in film school. It's different from a collaboration between a film-maker and an anthropologist, who might often be at cross purposes about the uses of visual media. I think we agree that we want to create the circumstances in which the spectator participates and arrives at certain meanings, and perhaps that leads to the development of a certain kind of language. This is probably one of the great gulfs between conventional anthropology and the possibility of visual anthropology. The indeterminacy of film language and film expression requires a degree of participation on the part of the "reader" to arrive at conclusions.

AG: Your partnership with Judith led to a unique kind of participatory cinema. It's certainly a very different kind of participatory cinema than say, Jean Rouch's. Yours is rational—I mean, Rouch fuses everything into this fantastic, shamanistic sort of experience, whereas I always feel that you do the opposite really, you actually make things clear, you enable people to see what the different options are and you yourselves establish who you are in the situation. How would you characterise the particular nature of your participatory style, the kind that you used in the

Turkana trilogy, because we would like to ask you how that changes in the context of the Australian films?

DM: I tend to think of participatory cinema as involving three different kinds of participation. One is the participation of the audience in constructing meaning. Then there's the sense in which for the viewer, the film-makers are participating in the life of the subjects: they're present, the film is contingent on the encounter between them. That's a form of participation that also comes out in observational cinema, perhaps in a different way. And thirdly, there's the degree of participation of the subjects in giving direction to the film. That of course can vary a lot from film to film and can depend upon how much interest they have in the film.

There wasn't much interest on the part of the Turkana in what we were doing as film-makers. They were much more interested in what we were doing as visitors and acquaintances, and sometimes as friends. In a sense they put up with the film-making because they realised that obviously that was what we were interested in, and that was our work: we had to do our work. That was quite different from the situation in Australia, where there was a very high level of media consciousness among Aboriginal people, and a sense of the political potency of the media, and of course a sense of injury, of having been dealt with badly by white people for two hundred years. That was one of the major differences in working in Australia. There had to be a wholly different kind of unwritten contract between ourselves and Aboriginal people which determined why a film should be made at all, and, if it was to be made, what each of us expected to get out of it.

NP: Can you give us an account of how that "invisible contract" was often drawn?

DM: There was a policy at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies that any films made by the Institute should be based on a request from an Aboriginal community. That ignored to some degree, or glossed over, the whole question of what a community is, or who might be asking you, or for what purposes. We decided it was important to try to make some films in Cape York, because there hadn't been many films made before in Queensland and we wanted to devote several years to a project there. We wanted it to be done as much as possible in cooperation and collaboration with people in one community. Of all the settlements we visited, the people of Aurukun seemed most interested. When we visited the communities, we'd say, "What we'd like to do is come and stay for a year. We are film-makers. You may have films in mind that you think it's important to make. We won't try to predict what sort of films might be made. We'll try to work that out together with you." One of the things that some of the influential people at Aurukun talked about first of all was the emerging ceremony of house-openings, of which they were quite proud. Even on the first visit they said: "That would be a film that you might be able to make, about a house-opening."

The first film was actually a film about mapping, **Familiar Places**, which came up unexpectedly. But the initial basis on which we began working, and the reason people had for wanting to cooperate with us, was a film about a house-opening. We also made it clear to people that it had to be a film that interested us as well, that we weren't simply making ourselves available as sort of a free film crew (*laughter*), or out of pure altruism. If we could find some common ground for making a film, then we might make it. Their reasons might be different from ours. We began by showing lots of films, lots of documentaries...

AG: That you had made, or others'?

DM: Some that we had made, but I think we showed about eighty documentaries in all over quite a few months.

NP: Eighty?

DM: Yes, because they didn't have television. People who'd travelled had obviously seen television, but they didn't routinely watch television. Their familiarity with documentary was pretty limited. They might have seen public health films about inoculation and washing babies and so on, but most of their film experience came from watching feature films. Every week feature films had been hired and shown on 16mm. Throughout Australia, after the Second World War, that was a common thing in Aboriginal communities, so that people had a great backlog of knowledge about fiction film, but they didn't really have much knowledge of documentary. We tried to show as many different kinds of documentaries as possible. We'd show them outdoors in the dry season, and in the wet season we showed them in the church, or in a school classroom, or underneath a building—you know, the buildings are raised off the ground.

AG: Did you have good turn-outs for them?

DM: Yes, a lot of people would come, although they were somewhat puzzled about the films. For example, we showed episodes of the British television series, **The Family**, which had been made in a working-class family in Reading. People weren't sure whether this was fiction or documentary, whether these were actors or not, because the style of the films was one of dramatic narrative, and they were often edited like fiction. The behaviour was very convincing: it could have been taken for good acting

perhaps. I'm sure the language barrier was also a problem. In any case, there was some puzzlement about how to read these films, whereas people had no trouble at all reading fiction. It was interesting that when a new fiction film was shown, everybody knew when the film was about to end. Before the credits came up, people were already standing up and melting away into the trees. And people could recite the plots of films they'd seen decades ago.

AG: Presumably you gained as much from this experience as they did. It was your attempt to try and understand how these communities might use a filmic medium themselves as much as exposing them to films they might not have seen. Was this part of an attempt to find a common ground for a collaborative venture?

DM: Yes, and each film that we made seemed to have a different reason for being made. It was sometimes not easy for us to understand why people wanted films made, the reasons were so complex. Probably the simplest case was **Takeover**, in which the community was relatively unified in opposing changes that were being made over their heads. But the community was actually quite fragmented and there were a lot of different political factions. There were different cultural groups. There were actually seven different languages spoken there, some by only a few people. You immediately became aware of the complexity of Aboriginal local politics, and inevitably, if you made a film about one group of people, you would be identified with them by others. They in turn would regard their participation with you as assisting them in some way in their relations with the rest of the community. For example, **The House Opening** focuses primarily on a woman from a very powerful family in the community and who herself was personally powerful as chairman of the council for

many years. Undoubtedly that film must have been perceived as enhancing their position in the community.

NP: It's interesting you mention the differentiation within the community, because in **Takeover** that wasn't represented, and one got the feeling of a completely united community. Linguistic, cultural and political differences were glossed over. Was that a decision that had to be made politically with the group in order to show a sort of united face to outsiders?

DM: No, I think at the time that was the position that everybody took, and the film reflects that position. It would have seemed irrelevant to start exploring all the factionalism that existed in the community at other times. But none of the films really explore that. There are certain suggestions of it in **The House Opening**. There's an indication that the widow has to perform certain ceremonies in order to resolve tensions between her family and her husband's family, to reassure them, if nothing else, that her husband hasn't been the victim of witchcraft or sorcery, and that she hasn't in any way been responsible for his death. The ritual fulfils the function of reaffirming the friendship and trust between the families. But that's all presented at a very subliminal level and certainly people wouldn't have wanted it expressed any more explicitly than that.

AG: Do you feel that you were participants in another sort of transitional moment, in that Aboriginal communities now make films for themselves, about themselves, and that this was just a phase?

DM: Yes, absolutely. It was a period in which there was a kind of precarious collaboration between people like ourselves and Aborigines, which they now no longer really need. There is a lot of Aboriginal media production now. And in

a sense it was a kind of idealisation, perhaps, of a notion of solidarity between Aboriginal people and sympathetic Whites. My view of it now is that it was a kind of film-making that rather confused the issues. In those films one never really knows quite who's speaking for whom, and whose interests are being expressed. It is not clear what in the film is coming from us and what is coming from them. You can do a kind of exegesis of the film and explain some of those things, but it's a slightly uncomfortable marriage of interests that masks a lot of issues.

NP: Wasn't this confusion a logical extension of participatory cinema?

DM: That's a good point (*laughter*).

AG: There is a suggestion in an interview about **Photo Wallahs** in *Visual Anthropology Review* that you recognise participation has so many fundamental problems about it that in the end one has to retreat back into individual authorship in some way.

DM: I think that's happening. There's an interest in trying other things again and re-exploring the individual author's voice and developing collaborative projects in which the voices are much more clearly defined.

AG: Would you say that any of the films that you made, say since the Australian set, are examples of that?

DM: Well, I suppose that in the last film that I made without Judith [**Tempus de Baristas**], you could say that my voice is clearer, whereas **Photo Wallahs** is a more collaborative project. In any case, **Photo Wallahs** is trying to do something quite different.

NP: I wonder if there is a link between the methods you have experimented with and the different forms of cultural resistance you have tried to represent. As you say, all of your films are about the question of injury in some way or another, an injury being imposed, possibly from an outside force. In **To Live With Herds** you explore the relationship between the state and nomadic people; then in the Australian films the relationship between Aboriginal people and colonisers; in **Photo Wallahs** the relationship between photography and commerce; and finally in **Tempus de Baristas** the possibility of maintaining a peasant culture in the modern world.

AG: Education...

NP: Education is the most ambivalent of all the forces of modernity that you capture.

AG: Exactly. It is central to **Kenya Boran**. In fact, the Sardinia film made me feel you'd gone back to that film on the question of education.

NP: It seems that the issue of injury is very much at the centre of these films. And particularly in the Australian films, you also identified the role of the film-maker as advocate for those who are the victims of injury. Perhaps the whole politics of resistance is blurring in contemporary society. Who has the right to make representations about cultural politics and who can be identified as doing injury? In this context, the roles of the progressive and the conservative tend to blur. I wonder if perhaps your insight about the difficulty of participatory film-making and the blurring of voices has something to do with the blurring of how to address injury in contemporary politics?

DM: I would say that although injury is an aspect of many of the films, or is in the background, it's not the driving force. In fact in the Australian films we were trying to make a counter-film to the usual films of advocacy, in which the injury was the only thing that really mattered. Those films were about victims and oppressors, and I think our answer to that was to try to make films that looked at the whole situation more obliquely. Instead of dealing in the polarities that tended to be produced and perpetuated by advocacy film-making, the aim was to try to illuminate the situation through films that looked at the victims of oppression not simply as victims. They tried to develop a different way for an audience to relate to them, to counteract the dehumanisation that accompanies the public identification of victims, the stereotyping created by that kind of advocacy. So in a sense the films aren't about injury directly. Perhaps I would even say that the major theme of these films is transmission of knowledge or culture, because many of them deal with situations in which people are re-inventing their culture, or are learning about it, or are transforming it, or are moving into a new role within their society, and that's certainly one of the things that most interests me. I think the main concern in all of these films is how people move from one stage to another within their own society.

AG: But I always feel that there is a sense of loss involved in this, that your films are about, maybe not injury, as much as loss.

DM: Yes, it's inevitable to feel a sense of loss when things are changing so rapidly in many of these communities, and people are constantly having to find stop-gap solutions to problems that would have been dealt with much more gradually in the past. Certainly I don't see societies as static, they're always evolving. But if the changes are so

massive, then there's a great deal of disorientation and a great deal of pain, and one has to regret that.

The awareness of loss is part of the whole process of film-making, in the sense of reclaiming some sort of representation from events that are passing by, that can only be represented so minimally and so awkwardly. There is also the sense of loss that comes from entering into people's lives in such a very intense way—when that comes to an end or has to change into some other relationship.

NP: I can now see how the paradigm that you're working with is opposed to salvage anthropology, which was "catch it before it's gone once and for all". It is more directed towards: "How do you face survival and represent struggle?"

DM: It may be simply a recognition of people's ingeniousness and courage in doing what they can do to survive in some ways—but maybe not in other ways.

This is an aside about the Turkana films: when Judith and I were going through some documents recently connected with the project, we discovered something we had completely forgotten. The original proposal was to make ten short films about a forthcoming wedding. Each film was to have been made from the perspective of a different participant, and I had in mind a kind of *Rashomon*, a structure based on different versions of the same event. Now, for all sorts of reasons, that wasn't possible, chiefly because one couldn't predict so far in advance that a wedding would, in fact, take place (*laughter*). It was a process of negotiation and it was only firm at the last minute. It depended on the rainfall and, of course, on the negotiations between the families involved. But that

original plan of representing the event through different perspectives underlies the structure of the existing films. The idea of ten short films then grew into three long films. As we began to make *The Wedding Camels*, the other two films began to take shape within the material. One thing that I think both Judith and I regret is that none of the three films really looks at women's lives to the extent that we look at Lorang's personality and history. It's done to some degree through *A Wife Among Wives*, but Judith in particular would have liked a film which gave a much fuller portrait of somebody like Arwoto, the senior wife of Lorang, or one of the other wives.

AG: One of the things that is distinctive to me about your work is this commitment to exploring something from different angles, rather than committing yourself to one position. That's what I understand that Peter Loizos's phrase, "sustained ambiguity", is about—to leave it in the end for the viewer to decide where they ought to situate themselves, in a way that other film-makers never allow you to do.

DM: Well, perhaps it's because there are two of us. But I think in the end it isn't as if we leave things completely open-ended, or that we don't attempt to make a particular analysis. I think we do try to do that. It isn't just a case of presenting the material and allowing the audience to do what they will with it. It's always very much guided.

AG: *Photo Wallahs* is very different from the other films in that it's an exploration of ideas; it's not an exploration of characters through situations. What struck me about it was the exploration of fantasies, dreams, all those dimensions—memory, subjectivity—which you hadn't dealt with so explicitly in the other films. Could you say what you think is a departure in that film?

DM: I think what you've said is true—that's one element of it. Although, oddly enough, it's the least personal film in the sense that it doesn't really get close to anyone, and yet it is about dreams and memory and very personal responses. For me the biggest difference between **Photo Wallahs** and the other films is that it was an experiment in trying to make a film that would provide a rich matrix for exploring a whole range of ideas about photography. I see that film very much as a multi-layered and multi-dimensional construction, which attempts to make as many links and internal references and cross-references as possible—to relate all sorts of themes about the religious and the secular, about painting and photography, about imagination and evidence—all sorts of things that really can't be explored except perhaps in that complex way.

The challenge in making the film was to try to create this mesh—without a central focus on a particular person, without a narrative of events—and to structure the film around the spectrum of possibilities that lie between photography as a medium of imagination and a medium of evidence. We did think at one stage of giving chapter titles to the three main sections of the film, because the film, although it has an introductory section which announces a set of themes, then progresses through what we felt to be three different kinds of responses to photography. But in the end we didn't want to chop it up so much. One reason for that is that the whole film is built on the kinds of ideas that are produced out of juxtapositions. So every time you create a separation between sequences, you lose a chance to suggest one more relationship. We shot a lot of material—for example, about the town of Mussoorie itself, about the rampant tourism and speculation in property and hotels, about ecological issues—but in the end we even felt we'd left out almost all the shots of the town itself in an effort to keep as many of the links as possible between

different kinds of photography. So the film is very tunnel-visioned in that respect. I think it's just an experiment in a new direction of documentary or ethnographic film-making, in which you try to deal with cultural relationships and cultural meanings in a different way, and lead the audience through them in a different way.

AG: It certainly reminded me very much of Mike Dibb's film about cricket [**Beyond A Boundary**]. This is how he approaches his own film-making, which is to take an idea or some sort of practice which interests him and then throw together all the different contexts in which it might happen. The film about cricket was as much about the game being played as about the poems and landscape of cricket. It creates this wonderful montage which sets up a whole set of relations that you can't conceive of when they only exist as individual elements in isolation. **Photo Wallahs** seems to be very suggestive in the same way.

DM: At the same time it's necessary to create some sense of direction in a film like that. You just can't throw up all the possibilities. You have to organise a kind of narrative of ideas at least, to give a film some sort of backbone.

NP: The difference again between you and Jean Rouch?

DM: No, I don't think so. He has plenty of backbone (*laughter*). But this kind of film can be very puzzling for a lot of people, because they don't know how to deal with it. I think **Photo Wallahs** is sufficiently enjoyable as a sort of kaleidoscopic tour, but it's the sort of film that I think can lead some people to say: Well, what's it all really about?

AG: **Tempus de Baristas** is very different from **Photo Wallahs**. They stand as kind of opposites. The difference between them recalls what you were saying about literature and

creative writing, that you felt that in the early stages of someone's career they should be inventive, and maybe later they should go inwards and draw on personal experience. I'm wondering if that's a movement that you now feel you've made, that you're actually coming back into yourself. The Sardinian film is a very personal film, in a way that the others are not?

DM: Yes, I think it's a much more personal film than many of the others, partly because it's not a collaborative film in the same way. It's not a film made in collaboration with Judith. It's not only a reflection of the relationships between the three protagonists, but an expression of my relationship with them, which is different in each case. It's also a film that for me is more concerned with place, with silence, with space, with people's non-verbal relationships—the way in which people inhabit themselves and in a sense create themselves as people. I've felt for some time that although many of our films are very verbal, and early on certainly focused on conversation, that that's a rather narrow representation of social experience. Perhaps that feeling is particularly strong among shepherds. I'm becoming much more interested in other dimensions of our personal and our social experience.

AG: So would you say that you're returning to an observational style?

DM: Well, in a sense it has to be, but I think it's not really a return to previous approaches. For me it's a transition to a different kind of reflexivity, which is expressed in different ways in the film. You know, twenty years ago, we were all being very explicit about including film-making premises in the film and alerting the audience to certain perspectives in the role of the film-maker. That was certainly important to do at the time, but on the other hand I think it's a rather

superficial way of reading the involvement of the maker in the work. It sets up the maker as the one who defines that relationship. A lot of the calls for reflexivity valorise the creation of an external structure that will give you the basis for understanding the work. The work is always somewhere in the middle and the author is the one who's expected to define the ways in which the film was made—or, in the case of written anthropology, explain the conditions under which the information was obtained. It's certainly arguable that the author is the last person who should be in charge of doing that, because, a) the author is too much an interested party; and b) the author may be quite unaware of much of his or her own investment in the work. Above all, this is a process that's constantly evolving during the creation of a work. A lot of what a film is about is discovering through the film what your relationship is to your subject. That is mirrored in the film, but it can't simply be presented as a set of given conditions. Lately I've been trying to think and write about reflexivity in a deeper sense. But that inevitably requires more from the audience in interpreting the place of the author.

AG: I think it's terribly important. I very much agree with what you're saying. I had many conversations about this with Herb Di Gioia when I was at the National Film School, partly because at that time I was completing a book about my fieldwork. I had a particular idea about who I was and how it was being expressed in that book, but of course there were so many aspects of myself that I wasn't in control of that are in the book, which I only began to be aware of when I talked with Herb. Your presence is *there* in the film; and what you say is such a superficial statement when you compare it to what you can feel in all sorts of intangible ways about the relationships embodied in a film.

NP: I was just thinking of the different positions you have taken up, and how pertinent they are, not just to film-making, but to shifts in the social sciences and humanities in general. Your movements, I think, are a pretty useful index of those shifts, and it's very very satisfying every now and then to have somebody whose work in a way ...

AG: ...embodies those historical moments...

NP: ... embodies those historical moments, and it's quite a burden to put on you, David, (laughter), but...

DM Well, it just means I'm a person of my own times.... Yes, maybe it's inevitable that things should have happened this way, I mean in terms of my own work.

NP: I must ask you one last question. If you weren't a film-maker, what would you rather have done?

DM: Oh gosh. I suppose a writer.

NP: Is there another position, apart from one of writer or film-maker, that you would like to have been in?

AG: A herder in those open spaces?

NP: A hunter, or living with herds? The Sardinian film is another way of living with animals, and it seems to me that this last film is a most beautiful film, precisely for what you describe in terms of its attention to stillness and silence; and its filmic qualities are very photographic. Scenes often begin with a still image, such as dusk or dawn, and then something unfolds.

DM: Yes, I suppose that in another life I would simply want to live with warm and nice people—and yes, maybe live with herds as well (laughter).

AG: Is there anything you want to add, David?

DM: I don't think so.

A Guide to Further Reading

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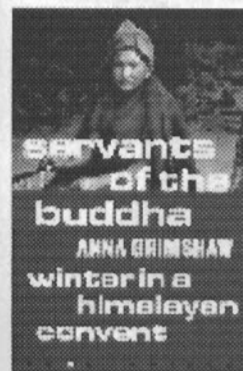
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